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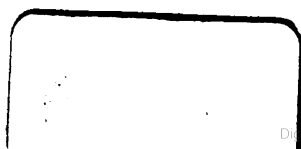
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THE IVORY RAIDERS

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THE IVORY RAIDERS

BY
WALTER DALBY



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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. FATHER AND SON	1
II. THE HONEST MERCHANTS	9
III. VAGRANTS	17
IV. WELCOME GUESTS	32
V. MAX KLEIN'S STORY	46
VI. THE DEAL	64
VII. THE FLYING AFRICAN	84
VIII. STRONG MEASURES	93
IX. A MESSAGE FROM QUEER STREET	111
X. INTRUDERS	128
XI. NEARING THE GOAL	144
XII. STRANGERS AHEAD	163
XIII. AT CLOSE QUARTERS	180
XIV. AT TEMBE'S KRAAL	199
XV. CROSSING THE BORDER	214
XVI. KIP'S PLAN	226
XVII. THE VIGIL	245
XVIII. THE STRUGGLE	260
XIX. THE RESULT	277
XX. THE RETURN	288
XXI. DOWN THE RIVER	298
XXII. HOME AGAIN	313

THE IVORY RAIDERS.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND SON.

ROBERT DESBOROUGH and his father were dining together. From their demeanour the butler judged that trouble was in the air. The elder man sought inspiration in the spear-shaped lights of the candles, while his son seemed to be learning the menu by rote. The few commonplace remarks that were passed served only to accentuate the lack of conversation. But at last the meal drew to an end. The attendant placed the massive decanters reverently on the table and obtruded the cigar-box; then, with the air of a man who has done his utmost to embark his charges for the Islands of the Blest, he left the two alone.

Simultaneously with the click of the door-handle, Mr. Desborough began.

"I owe you an apology, Bob, for not having given sufficient consideration to your affairs of late.

The Ivory Raiders.

As you know, my time has been greatly taken up, and I thought it would do you no harm to kick your heels about for a month or so after leaving Oxford. But the information with which you honoured me this morning has brought matters to a point, and I am going to explain my ideas to you."

Conversation between the two was apt to be one-sided. The son composed himself to listen with deference. He was a youth of two-and-twenty, with an open, freckled countenance and grey eyes, that looked leniently upon the doings of mankind. In figure he was slightly corpulent, due to a liking for the delicacies of the kitchen and the cellar. During his career at college it was said that he could give an excellent imitation of the drum and fife with no other accessories than his lips, knuckles, and the edge of a deal table.

"How do you propose to support a wife, may I ask?"

The question was embarrassing. But it could not be evaded, and Bob answered it with some of his father's directness.

"You give me a liberal allowance, sir. I understand you are well-to-do, and—er—I hope you could see your way to help me in this matter."

"Precisely," replied the other drily. "Yes, I am rich enough, for that matter; but I don't feel

Father and Son.

it an obligation to provide the money for a marriage between Mrs. Mauprey and yourself."

"I trust you have no objection to Violet as a daughter-in-law?" queried Robert stiffly.

"None, as my daughter-in-law, several as your wife. She is a good many years senior to you, for one thing, and you are a baby beside her as far as knowledge of the world goes! Here I come to my point." He paused to collect his thoughts, helped himself to port, and cracked a nut, extracting the kernel with the dexterity of a squirrel. He looked equally competent to pick out the kernel of any problem in life.

"One of the things that weary me when I come into contact with your companions, whether they be of your age or thirty years ahead of you, is their utter want of originality and initiative, and their dread of being pulled out of the rut in which they have chosen to saunter through life. At the age of five-and-twenty, when a man should be a force to be reckoned with, they are mere automatons; at fifty, they become encumbrances. Hunting, card-playing, and gadding about are good enough as recreations—I'm not narrow-minded—but as occupations these pursuits are unsubstantial and unsatisfying. You follow me?"

An apprehensive expression that crept into his son's face answered the question, and the other continued:

The Ivory Raiders.

"You are my only son, and I have decided that you shall avoid such a course. I desire earnestly that you shall be a thinking, acting individual, who may find himself equal to any situation likely to arise. As you know, I made my own fortune. I don't want you to do the same, but I mean that, before you handle any of the money, you shall learn what life means from actual, first-hand experience."

"I agree with you, sir, that it would be a fine thing for me to see something of life before I settle down."

"Very well. Then I suggest that you cut the traces for a year or so, and go right away—say to Africa—and shift for yourself."

The bolt had fallen. Robert rose from the table in amazement.

"But, surely, this is unfair. Now, I am engaged to Violet Mauprey. A month ago——"

"Sit down, my boy, and don't get excited. I've been thinking over this matter all day. If you have any grit in you, you can do a good deal in two years to show you are worthy of touching the reins at home. This is to be the real thing. I don't want you swaggering through the ports of the world with a tame curate at your heels, whom you can send to bed at eight o'clock. Mind, I don't ask you to make money, though I expect you to show that you can keep your end up. Take kicks and give kicks—put yourself into action. I would

Father and Son.

even sooner you returned home the hero of a great mistake than that you should live on here an amiable mediocrity. As for Mrs. Mauprey, in a couple of years you will be twenty-four and she twenty-nine; the ratio will still stand, but your ignorance of affairs will be less abysmal than it is now, and that will be a hundred points in your favour. Besides, you will both know your minds better."

Robert Desborough listened with an air of sullen bewilderment. His father was not a man to be argued with. His decisions were generally sound, and people had lost the habit of disputing them. Moreover, his self-made wealth had made him an autocrat. But in this case Bob felt he must speak up for himself.

"Assuming that what you say is just and necessary, why do you want me to go right away? Why cannot I take up a career in London?"

"I've thought of that," replied his father, for the first time allowing any tone of explanation to come into the conversation; "but it wouldn't be the same thing. I made my money on the Stock Exchange, but I don't know that I am anxious for you to mature in that atmosphere. Besides, if you went there, you would go, as it were, chaperoned by me. You would be Samuel Desborough's son, and start with undue advantages.

The Ivory Raiders.

The same anywhere else in England. Nor is the army any good for my purpose. They don't let you think for yourself till you are forty, then you can't do it. Just cut yourself adrift from every home influence and favour, and we will soon see what you are made of."

"This is rather staggering. You have evidently thought out the scheme thoroughly, but I can hardly grasp the meaning of it yet. Suppose—er—suppose I did not quite see my way to fall in with your plans—what then?"

"Nothing very tragic, my boy. The allowance I should give you would perhaps admit of your hunting twice a week and would keep you decent; but . . . I hardly think Mrs. Mauprey would marry you on it."

Bob's eyes kindled. "You have no right to say that, sir."

"Well, perhaps not," replied Mr. Desborough, rising to terminate the discussion. "Think the matter well over, and you will find I am not so mad as I may seem. And, remember"—he took his son's hand with much kindness—"a pair of charming eyes and a well-shaped nose do not make such an indelible impression at two-and-twenty as you may imagine."

Next day Bob rode to the meet, wondering what Violet Mauprey would think of his father's injunctions. She was there before him, surrounded

Father and Son.

by a group of stolid pink and white hunting men mounted on horses even more scrupulously groomed than their riders. He joined the circle, receiving a bright nod from his *fiancée*, and curt but neighbourly greetings from the others. In a few minutes they were away, and no one had a thought for anything but the hounds. Bob rode straight that morning. The higher the fence or the wider the ditch that challenged him, the more was it welcome. The run seemed to restore his self-respect and gave him confidence. His spirits were up and the blood whirled through his veins. Even threatened banishment became less formidable as he galloped over the countryside.

“Topping run, wasn’t it, old chap?” observed Mrs. Mauprey, as they turned homewards. She was one of those women who fancy that they make themselves more attractive to men by adoption their phraseology.

They turned down a by-lane and he told of his checked aspirations. But as he recounted the conversation of the previous evening his spirits fell. Grey mists seemed to have turned the sun into a disc of brass. The scantily-clad hedges were sombre with the ivy-greens and purples of approaching winter, and the air was laden with moisture and the tang of decaying leaves. He believed, as he spoke, that there had never been a son so tyrannically dictated to before.

The Ivory Raiders.

Violet Mauprey's eyes set a trifle viciously as she listened.

"Is your father under the impression that I—how shall I put it?—that I met you more than half-way?"

"Not a bit," retorted Bob ingenuously. "The first thing I told him about the matter at all was that you had refused me three times. But you must not think he is as mad as he appears. He can't do things the same as other people. That is all."

"I don't think he is mad, and I think you will be wise to do as he wishes."

"I feel that, in my bones; but I wish all the same he wasn't so deucedly downright in his notions. It will pay us in the long run, though, old girl, if you will wait for me."

"I am no novice at waiting," she replied, with a queer little smile. "But . . . I wonder if you will understand what I mean? . . . Nobody knows of this but your father, you and I, and I want it to stand at that. It won't make the slightest difference to my behaviour, but a prolonged engagement does not sit very well on a woman of my age—especially with such a boy as you." She leaned over and touched his hand.

"You must write every week and buck me up," he said. "And, sweetheart, promise you will keep in with the gov'nor."

"I promise," she replied.

CHAPTER II.

THE HONEST MERCHANTS.

Two men sat in the shade of a spacious veranda overlooking the River Zambesi. For some time neither moved nor spoke. Presently the bigger of the two made a slap at a hippopotamus fly that alighted on his bare arm, missed it and ejaculated a vicious Portuguese oath, then began to stuff a large black pipe with leaf tobacco.

"Well, what do you think of it, Raphael?" he asked.

His companion seemed to be asleep, but that was only a habit. Raphael was never so mentally alert as when he lay back in a big lounge-chair with his eyes shut. He was trying to plan how he could throw the risk of the scheme on his partner, and gain more than his share of the profits. An unpleasant little man he was in appearance—worse to have dealings with. In spite of his white clothes, he looked unclean. His sallow face, hooked nose, and tawny, unkempt fringe of a beard suggested the peddling Jew of a Levantine port. The other was a more wholesome-looking man, but none too prepossessing. Max Klein stood over six foot, and was well made

The Ivory Raiders.

and handsome, after his style, but his face gave no feeling of confidence. The eyes were restless and desirous ; the straight, thick brows nearly met over the nose ; the nostrils were wide, as though keen to scent profit or pleasure, and they expanded over a mouth determined, but sensual. He wore his short, strong, black hair brushed backwards. A moustache did its best to cover the expression of the mouth. Indeed, when he put on his smoke-tinted glasses and assumed a genial manner, Max passed as a courteous and, possibly, as a learned gentleman, a man to credit, as many had found to their trouble. Both men were within a couple of years of forty, though it took more than a glance to feel assured of the fact.

Max repeated his question more sharply.

“Come, wake up, senhor ! Are you willing to go into this venture with me ? We must make up our minds.”

“Is it safe, Max ?”

“Safe ? Safe as banking, you old miser. See here ! Smart is away in England, which is colossal luck ; the Protectorate people, after their pig-headed English manner, have raised trouble north of the lake through interfering with the slave traffic, so they won't bother us. We get news that three men, seemingly made for our purpose, are sent by Providence—like the ram to your old grandfather, Abraham—at the happy moment ; and

The Honest Merchants.

the ivory is still there, or was, a month ago. Raphael, we should be imbecile if we neglected this opportunity!"

"Over ten thousand kilos, you reckon, senhor?"

"Twenty thousand, at least, only some of it must have gone rotten. Put the value at two hundred and fifty thousand stamped rupees, or say £15,000 English money. It is worth dividing, isn't it?"

A greedy look came into Raphael's eyes at the mention of so much money.

"Now can you manage the Arabs to run the stuff out of the country? It greatly depends on that," questioned Max.

"There is a caravan due on the river soon. They are going to Matakaenia. However, they will stop if there is trade. But how do you know these gringos * will take the job?"

The other laughed. "The boy who passed them on the road this morning told me they are destitute—in rags, in fact—and that they spoke English. I think you will agree, Raphael, that Englishmen, even when not entirely destitute, will occasionally do things for money in this country that they don't boast of in their precious newspapers. But when they are in poverty—well, we need have no doubt of it. And from what my boy tells me, they seem to be a tough lot."

* Gringos: strangers, newcomers.

The Ivory Raiders.

"And how much will they want for the undertaking?"

Max answered softly:

"I think they will be reasonable. I think we shall show them it is to their advantage to be reasonable."

"It is risky, senhor. A lot of money, but a great risk. And supposing Smart hears of it when he returns?"

"Smart *will* hear of it, *amigo*. I mean him to. But what can he do? Three men come to my house, quite strangers to me. I put them up for a few days. I am a charitable man, Raphael—oh, Smart knows that! Then I fit them out to hunt elephant, on sharing terms—a common custom of the country, is it not, senhor? The scoundrels raid Msoro's—or Tembe's, it is now—ivory, sell it to the Arabs, and skip from the country. Of course, Smart will know I engineered the scheme, but he can't prove it, and we are not in his dear grandmotherly territory, Allah be thanked! Thus, Raphael"—and here he placed a hand on the other's knee—"after five patiently-waited, tedious years, I shall be quits with Mr. God-Almighty Smart, in spite of his cleverness. And that is the sweetest part of the contract."

But the Jew had no enthusiasm on this point.

"Revenge and money-making! Never confuse two aims, my friend. In business, one's mind must dwell with simplicity on the one end, to

The Honest Merchants.

ensure success; the other only blinds the judgment. Money-making is a man's work. Leave revenge to fools and women."

A silence followed this advice. The conversation had been carried on in Portuguese, the language of the country. Both men let their eyes rest upon the view from the veranda, while they gave their thoughts to the matter under discussion.

It was afternoon. The heat had moderated, and the lazy little river-town of Orobo Grande awoke from its siesta to make a pretence of doing some work. The standard, which for half a day had enfolded the flagpole of the dilapidated fort, heralded the approach of the evening breeze by a spasmodic attempt to stretch itself, and after one or two ineffectual efforts, succeeded in displaying a distorted view of its castles and shields, with the five white spots emblematical of the wounds of Our Lord. The two gaunt hills which stand as sentinels at the back of the town lost a tinge of their burnt-out, ferruginous appearance, and became less forbidding, while the burnished face of the great Zambesi was disturbed by ripples that revealed the green rosettes of the water-plants, till now obliterated by the glare, hurrying along the main channels to assist in building new obstructions at the delta, some hundreds of miles away.

Beyond the river stretched a country only partially known. But as the two men stared across

The Ivory Raiders.

the water and the arid verdure of the further bank, their eyes forgot the distance, and they pictured a native village, the repository of a vast store of ivory that had been gathered for generations past, and hoarded with superstitious care.

"Well, *amigo*, shall we try?" asked Max at length.

"It is worth it; worth a deal of risk. But it will need diplomacy, Max."

The other called a servant, and addressing him in a local dialect, said:

"Go along the road until you meet the three white men you passed this morning. Tell them my house is at their service, and that I have heard of their misfortunes. You speak enough English to explain this to them?"

"Yes, senhor. I start at once."

"*Então*, till later," said Raphael, rising. "You will, perhaps, come round to-night, and tell me what you think of our men. But approach them cautiously, Max. A good impression is half the bargain."

"Possibly it would be safer for you to create it, senhor," replied his partner suavely. But the other made no retort, and went out.

It may be put to the credit of Max Klein that he would as willingly have offered hospitality to these newcomers had he had no design on their services. Hotels are unknown beyond the coast-line in this country, and travellers find a welcome among the

The Honest Merchants.

residents. The least desirable will receive food and shelter sufficient for his needs until he can conveniently move on. If he be "a good fellow," a prodigality of liquor is added to the debt. Max did not fetter himself, however, with the notion that a guest was sacred under his roof, considering that he should be grateful for what he received, and that if his host outwitted him his stupidity must be held responsible. Had he preferred honest measures, this man might have been a useful and prosperous citizen in any town, though assuredly he would have found the position a dull one, for he loved a devious course for the excitement it brought with it. Dutch by birth, he had gone to England as a young man, where he mastered the language with singular ease. Thence, after a few years, to the Cape, where his talents soon earned him the cold shoulder of righteously-minded people. In seeking a line of least official interference with his abilities, he drifted from town to town along the east coast until he came to Beira, whence a turn of fortune took him inland to Orobo. Here he recognised the broad-mindedness of the authorities and a congenial sphere for action, so he settled down as a trader and dealer in any merchandise that offered a profit.

When Raphael discovered the town and appreciated its peculiar merits, he found Max a prosperous merchant. The two combined as naturally

The Ivory Raiders.

as gold and mercury, each recognising in the other qualities lacking in himself. Together they might achieve greatness, according to their lights ; apart, they would probably have to content themselves with mediocrity. They had separate stores and houses, conducting their daily business independently ; but when a venture of any risk or magnitude occurred, however little they might be seen in conference, it was safe to assume that the one was as deeply involved as the other.

Raphael arrived in Orobo from nowhere in particular. He came with little money, and, for stock in trade, relied on a knowledge of the malpractices of several nationalities, while the number of languages he spoke with fluency admitted a residence in queer corners of the world. To flatter the susceptibilities of the community he proclaimed himself a Portuguese subject, and certainly his speech and habits gave no reason for contradiction. He was more cunning and less daring than his partner, but notwithstanding that he had provided the brains and the initiative for their most successful operations, the other, by force of character, held the mastery ; and though Raphael might see cause to doubt the prudence of some of Max's designs, he usually found it convenient to share in them.

CHAPTER III.

VAGRANTS.

THREE men trudged manfully along the path which crosses the last ridge that leads to the town of Orobo Grande. They travelled without encumbrances, though evidently not from choice, for they were destitute of every convenience that makes a journey tolerable in this country. A stick, cut from a bamboo-bush, and the clothes on their backs, constituted their property; they could not even muster a wardrobe that would go into a pocket-handkerchief, and their condition showed that they had journeyed thus for many days.

They walked in Indian file, many yards apart. The narrowness of the path favoured the formation, but apart from this they felt unsociable. Recent hardships had strained their temperament to quarrelling point, so they wisely abstained from unnecessary conversation. The foremost traveller was by far the shortest. A battered sun-helmet sheltered a face that wore a truculent, hostile expression wrought by years of strife with an unsympathetic world. His carriage was assertive; it suggested in some subtle manner the gait of a

The Ivory Raiders.

London street arab. His language was in keeping with the idea. One surmised that in a former state of incarnation Mr. Henry Adolphus Smith had been a mosquito. His companions called him Kip; this for brevity, and because the nickname had still some power to annoy the little man.

A loose-limbed giant with a florid, good-natured, bearded face and listless grey eyes, came next. His name was David Anderson. Among the settlements he was known as a "hard case"; it took six men to hold him when he was drunk, and possibly two of them might escape without an injury. Normally, he was an amenable person, having no taste for hard work. In his time he had used every employment open to men of small learning and no capital, with the result that he had barely paid his way from the age of thirteen to forty-five. His least unsuccessful pursuit was prospecting; it kept him away from saloons and bars, while the possibilities were exhilarating.

The third of these vagrants was none other than Mr. Robert Desborough, son of Samuel Desborough, of Capel Court, Berkeley Square, and Brickham Manor. He was still graduating for the useful life according to his father's prescription. A year or more of endeavour had left its mark both on his person and his pocket. In appearance he was thinner, more sunburnt, and, it must be admitted, more alert. To his credit, he was the only member

Vagrants.

of the party that attempted to preserve a cheerful demeanour, for he whistled as he trudged along and flicked at the bushes with his stick. The well-cut but ragged clothes that he wore, and possibly a pound or so left in a bank in Natal, were the sum of his possessions, representing the balance of a thousand pounds which his father had given him as capital. The dissipation of this money had been an enlightening experience. Africa is the land of glorious opportunities to those who hold the keys of finance, and at the beginning of this career the young speculator had many times believed himself to be following in the footsteps of the millionaires; but these alluring enterprises, projected with vast enthusiasm, had, in each case, failed to fulfil their promise, leaving their originator more and more impoverished. His banking book pitilessly told the tale of his transactions. Every entry save the first—his father's donation—was on the outgoing side. Thus far had Mr. Robert Desborough submitted to the kicks of fortune, and he ached to be able to return them. An opportunity of making something of a name had seemed to occur through a native rising. He had joined as a trooper in the irregular horse. Still the Fates were ironical. His troop was out scouting when the battle took place, and on disbandment the only reputation he had acquired was that of being a first-rate cook.

This adventure, however, brought him in contact

The Ivory Raiders.

with his two companions, and when the outbreak was quelled they embarked in a partnership to prospect for gold. Each man was notoriously unlucky, but they were all imbued with the fighting spirit. Such an ill-starred trio, they agreed, should challenge the sympathy of even the pitiless goddess that had, so far, misguided their footsteps. But, alas, this combination fared no better than the units had done ! It seemed, rather, that the aggregated misfortune of the individual was visited upon them as a trinity.

Robert took his failures, outwardly at least, with a humorous philosophy. He detailed his reverses to his father, giving the genesis and collapse of each operation with the critical thoroughness of a man who relates the doings of another. His attitude towards himself in these letters was one of detachment. "I, Robert Desborough," they seemed to imply, "have made my best endeavours, according to my lights, and the responsibility of their misdirection must be apportioned by wiser heads than mine betwixt Providence and the parent who sent me forth on this hare-brained mission." But inwardly he rebelled against his own incompetence, and he knew that he would not return home until he had struck one winning blow to restore his failing self-confidence.

He little guessed how eagerly his father studied these letters. And the astute stockbroker was well

Vagrants.

content with the outcome of his experiment. He neither expected nor wished his son to make money, but he meant him to realise the value of it, and to learn how to handle it. Initial failure was the best task-master Robert could have, he reflected. Yet, with all his sapience, he failed to foresee the temptations to which his son would be subjected by reason of these very failures. He counted on being able to whistle him home when he thought fit!

Wearied of a profitless search for gold, the prospectors at last agreed to sell their kit and go hunting. For this purpose, the country inland of Beira held great attractions, for it had been but little used by Europeans at the time, and elephants were reported plentiful. To this little seaport they repaired, by means of a cockroach-ridden cargo-boat from Durban. They had sold all their prospecting gear, with anything else that would raise money, in order to equip a small hunting and trading expedition. And Desborough fearlessly invested his diminished capital in gewgaws and gaudy calicoes. He took the precaution, however, of leaving word of his destination with the bank manager. They arrived in fine health and spirits, for everyone qualified to give advice approved of their designs.

While making final preparations at Beira, they sought the acquaintance of a Portuguese custom-house officer, a weed of a man clad in a dirty white uniform embellished by brass buttons and tarnished

The Ivory Raiders.

gold braid. Bob's two companions had long since learned the convenience of earning the favour of a Government employee. The advantage was apparent when they misbehaved! In this case a bottle of brandy and some malignant cigars made him an inmate of their camp until they started. On learning their project he advised them, with all the force of a polyglot vocabulary, to make for Makombi's country, where assuredly fortune would greet them. The chief was a Christian—or only awaiting the opportunity of conversion. The people were guileless and hospitable. Mining concessions could be obtained for a case of spirits; gold-dust was exchanged for a blanket, or a charge or two of gunpowder.

"Especially gunpowder," asserted the official. "But"—remembering his position in the customs—"that must, of course, be smuggled across the frontier, for we are very strict if such a matter comes to our ears. *Diabo*, how I wish I could come with you!"

On the day appointed for departure the British consul handed Robert Desborough a cablegram and a letter. A vessel had just arrived from Natal. The cable was from his father. It ran:—

"Return home at once—excellent opening—Parliamentary career. Draw funds Standard Bank.—Desborough."

And the letter was from Mrs. Mauprey, breaking

Vagrants.

off their engagement. She gave, as reasons, disparity of age and temperament, coating the pill rather obviously with remarks flattering to him and disparaging to herself. Bob read both missives, then walked into the bush. His plans and aspirations were rudely thrown out of balance, and he needed solitude to recover himself. Yet he was surprised to find that Violet's letter caused him comparatively slight distress. Her attractiveness was too superficial to exert a potent influence across time or distance, and, unwittingly, his affection for her had been on the wane since he sailed from England. The letter brought enlightenment. He was hurt and indignant, but not disconsolate. The despatch of the cable within a week or so of the letter suggested that there might be an understanding between his two correspondents, and he felt accordingly a grievance against both—irrational, he admitted, as far as his father was concerned, but none the less insistent. The thought that his father might be willing to have him back because Violet had jilted him was as humiliating as the idea of returning home with all his battles lost. He came to a decision hurriedly but coolly. He was no longer to be moved hither and thither by others; he would steer his own vessel.

As his comrades were awaiting him he hastened back to the consulate, where he wrote a formal

The Ivory Raiders.

little note to Mrs. Mauprey, and arranged with the consul to cable to his father that he was just off to the interior and would not return for some months, but that he would communicate again on returning to Beira. Then the little expedition set forth to try yet another bout with fortune.

It really seemed that their luck had turned with this new enterprise. They passed Fontesvilla, the fever-laden haunt at the mouth of the estuary, without so much as a tremor, thence on to the Pungwe flats. Here game abounded, and they hunted eland, sable antelope, and other game, taking the horns and sending the meat down to the settlement. At last they fell in with a herd of elephants and slept on their tracks for a week, finally killing two bulls with heavy tusks. After this their quarry seemed to have been spirited out of the district. They hunted highland and lowland without success. It was then that the words of the custom-house officer came to them, and they turned their steps to the north-west.

A tedious and difficult journey brought them to the outskirts of Makombi's country, where they halted, sending two guides in advance with handsome gifts to ensure a friendly greeting. The main party followed next morning, jubilant over their prospects and eager to meet the benevolent chief. At midday they rested, and after a meal the white men took a nap under the shade of a large acacia.

Vagrants.

Bob was the first to awaken, and his ears were surprised by the stillness around him ; not a man laughed, not a carrier chattered ! They had deserted apparently in haste. As he was rousing the others, the noise of an approaching rabble came to him, and before they could take up a defensible position a horde of barbarians, armed with a variety of weapons, from bows to Martini rifles, swept down on them. Resistance at such close quarters would have been foolish. An elderly Kaffir, with a covetous, evil-looking face and filed teeth, directed that their rifles should be surrendered. Intuitively they realised that this man must be the gentle Makombi—alas ! a Makombi that showed no desire for Bibles or barrel-organs, and they spared a moment to curse fervently that perfidious official. It was made evident to them by signs that, as a concession not to be dallied with, they might depart as they stood. If they stayed their fate was indicated by a horrid gesture that turned them cold, so they slouched away, caring little whither they went, their hearts aching with wickedness and longing for revenge. Their fatal luck had followed them into a new country.

When they were sufficiently clear of the territory occupied by this disheartening savage to take an interest in their own concerns, they had to decide what route to pursue : whether to struggle back to Beira, or to push on to a Portuguese settlement

The Ivory Raiders.

that lay some days' march to the north-west. Listlessly they debated as to which was the less repugnant course. They might make their way back to Beira in safety, in which case they would have the satisfaction of meeting that custom-house officer again. And with exceptional luck they could work a passage down to Durban. But the thought of arriving in that town destitute, of having to record yet another failure, was unbearable, so they decided to steer for the unknown haven of Orobo Grande, and try once again their luck in a new country. They were now careless, despondent men.

Of the happenings during that journey they spoke little in after days. Derelicts though they were, they held straight opinions of the respect that the white man should exact in his intercourse with the black; and that respect was non-existent for the time. Fortunately the villagers along the road were peaceable folk, and it was also the spring time of the year, when the earth yields its first-fruits and men are charitable. A pocket-knife, five empty cartridge-cases, and the brass buttons of Kip's tunic brought in exchange some native flour, tomatoes, chickens and eggs; and, true adventurers that they were, they lived prodigally while these lasted. Not understanding the vernacular, their shopping depended upon pantomime. Kip acted as "spokesman," and played the part admirably:

Vagrants.

he had the art of displaying an old pocket-comb so that it seemed a covetable possession in the eyes of such unsophisticated traders.

But their dispensable property soon gave out, and it became an alternative of swapping the clothes off their backs or stealing their daily food. No sensible person could argue as to which course to pursue, and they drew lots to decide who should undertake the first robbery. At night they dug sweet potatoes from the beds near the rivers, and pilfered the young mealies and tomatoes from the gardens. Once Kip crept into a village to take some embers from a smouldering fire outside a hut, and the dogs gave warning. He was chased by a yelling mob for a mile until the darkness gave him a final advantage. When he rejoined his companions and told of this indignity he nearly wept, and the others used bitter and profane expressions to show their sympathy.

But on the sixth day some scattered cultivation indicated that they were approaching a settlement, and they mended their pace accordingly.

"We must be near the town now," sang out Bob at last, as they approached the top of the ridge. "I saw a nigger in the bush, a little while back, wearing trousers. That means white man about."

Neither of his comrades felt called upon to reply.

"The worst of it is," continued the speaker, who

The Ivory Raiders.

was tired of silence, "every time you turn a bend of this rotten hill you find another mile of it. It is like a triple-expansion chin. I never knew a hill yet that had the top in the right place."

But this time they were at the summit. The path widened into a clearing, and Kip, springing on to an ant-heap, looked anxiously ahead. Pointing, with a cry of welcome, to a group of buildings a mile distant, he exclaimed :

"Be'old ye noble city of Orobo !"

The others crowded beside him on the ant-heap. For a full minute no one spoke; their minds had dwelt on this spot for many days. They were too interested and thankful for conversation.

In the softening light of the afternoon the town looked picturesque and beautiful. A dozen or more spacious flat-roofed houses and buildings, with white or variously-tinted sides and broad verandas, were set among trees. On three sides they were surrounded by stretching fields of Indian-corn, pleasantly green, and waving to the breeze. On the fourth flowed the Zambesi, full to its banks after some late rains—miles of hurrying sunlit waters catching every hue of the sky and of the foliage on its banks. Fronting the river stood a row of imperial palms, their feathery crowns gesticulating and bowing, as if holding solemn conversation. At the back of the town were grouped the beehive huts of the native

Vagrants.

quarter, whence issued strings of women and children, carrying large earthenware pots on their heads; with singular grace they marched to the river to obtain water for the night. In the shadows of an island within rifle-shot of the town, two hippopotami with their young sported ponderously in the river.

"Something like a picture in an old Bible, bar the hippos," remarked Bob at last. "Only there isn't enough paint."

"I propose," said Kip, "we 'ave our dress clothes sent to the best 'otel, and tell 'em to put the champagne on ice, an' be sure an' have the best beds aired."

Anderson grunted. "We'll be damned lucky, my son, if we don't have to sleep in the open and sneak our grub from the niggers again. They mayn't have any use for dead-heads."

But this was no time for pessimism.

"You leave that to me, my son," retorted Kip. "I'll start an account at the bank with an overdraft. Come along and let's get in before dark."

They moved forward hopefully; the memory of half their grievances was obliterated by the comforting sight of the settlement. It would be strange if they could not obtain therein food, drink, and perchance a change of garments. True, they had no money; but they were strong, experienced

The Ivory Raiders.

men, ready for any task, and if hospitality were scarce they might draw upon their services.

But a surprise was in store for them. Hardly had the rancid smell from the Kaffir quarters greeted their nostrils than they were accosted by a native boy, dressed in a white cotton shirt and a calico skirt which fell to his ankles. He wore a red sepoy cap at the back of his head, which he removed before giving his message.

"*Bom dia*, senhors. My master, him say, him plenty pleased you come stop longa him. Him live in big house, longa dat flag dere. Him get word you get robbed Makombi country." Then, as if to dissociate himself from the misdeeds of the reprehensible Makombi, and at the same time to pay a compliment to his master's guests, he added sententiously: "Makombi him one dam bad man. He no Englishman."

The outcasts listened with open-mouthed astonishment.

"This sounds pretty handsome," said Anderson. "Who is your boss, boy?"

"Him S'hor Max Klein. Live at big store, *casa grande* dere, with big flag." The boy pointed to the largest of the stone houses that faced the Zambesi, over which floated the red, white and blue bars of the Dutch flag. Without a pause they accepted the invitation. The thought of once more having shelter over their heads, and decently

Vagrants.

cooked food, drove everything from their minds save gladness at such good fortune. It occurred vaguely to Desborough that their future host appeared anxious to forestall their company, but they were in no position to be over-suspicious. None of them stood to lose anything, and at the worst they would be richer by a meal and a night's rest. And for that alone it was worth risking much. Besides, he reflected sombrely, as they trudged behind their guide, nothing could be much worse than what they had already undergone.



CHAPTER IV.

WELCOME GUESTS.

SENHOR MAX welcomed his guests from the steps of the veranda. His manner was courteous but reserved, and well calculated to gain confidence. He spoke English with ease.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen, I am pleased to make your acquaintance. My boy who passed you on the road brought word to me that you had met with many misfortunes in Makombi's country, so I take the liberty of asking you to be my guests so long as it suits your purpose. It is strange how news travels in this part of the world, is it not?"

"Very strange," replied Anderson; "since we have not told a word about it, not being able to speak their lingo."

"Ah! but the natives pass the word from village to village, and our boys come to hear the news and then tell us. I should not wonder if they are not already discussing in their quarters your doings along the road."

His hearers stole furtive glances towards each other. They winced at the thought of their ignominious adventures becoming public property

Welcome Guests.

among the Portuguese. Politely ignoring their embarrassment Max begged them to be seated, and they stretched themselves on the long cane chairs with audible satisfaction. But notwithstanding their host's cordiality, they felt they were under the shrewd observation of the eyes behind those smoke-tinted glasses.

Max then threw out a feeler.

"Though we are out of civilisation here, gentlemen, we yet have a bush telegraph which happens, by a lucky chance, to be in working order. In case you wish to communicate with your bankers or agents at the coast, or down south, it will be possible so to do in a short time."

Kip chuckled caustically.

"I regret," he said, "to 'ave to confess that my guardians 'ave forgotten to send me my allowance this quarter. Consequently, for the moment, I'm stony-broke."

"I've got no use for bankers and agents," Anderson remarked moodily.

Max turned to Desborough. For the fraction of a second Bob did not reply, though he returned the glance pleasantly. He had vowed not to touch the money his father had cabled to the bank, though never had he been so keenly tempted.

"I'm glad of this opportunity to tell you, sir, that, like my friends, I have no money. We have lost everything on this last trip."

The Ivory Raiders.

"You are none the less welcome," returned Max heartily. "But come, I am neglecting my duties as host. I have told my servants to prepare for you in the big room. I regret that I have but one to put at your disposal; but it is airy. There are two stretchers and a hammock. Perhaps travellers like yourselves will forgive such rough hospitality? My boys have put in a bath and some water, also clean linen from the store. No, I ask you not to thank me, gentlemen—just cheap linen goods such as we use for native trade. See, I wear them myself. Cheap, but they serve their purpose; after that they can be cast aside. You are most welcome to all that I offer you."

Touched by his consideration, they followed him to a spacious room furnished as he had described. After their wanderings and discomforts, the beds, with the cheap print shirts and clothing laid thereon, struck a high note of refinement.

"Strike me," ejaculated Kip, "if this ain't like the fairy story where you only 'ave to rub a bloomin' old lamp to get all you want! Only we 'aven't 'ad to rub no lamp," he added.

"Is there anything more I can send to you?" inquired the Dutchman, as he turned to leave the room.

They were about to reply that they had everything, when Kip said, in a manner that, for him, was almost bashful:

Welcome Guests.

"I say, mister, you couldn't loan me a razor for half an hour, could you?"

The others laughed. It was a camp joke that the conduct and manners of the little man were mysteriously involved with the condition of his chin. With the growth of the stubble his behaviour was supposed to deteriorate. Usually when on the march he shaved on a Saturday night, a hebdomadal trait derived, according to Desborough, from generations of Upper Thames Street ancestors. Since the disaster in Makombi's country, more especially since he had been chased by the villagers, his temper had daily grown more mulish, and it had taken all the forbearance and good sense of his comrades to do with him. The request for a razor, consequently, was taken as a sign of penitence, and Bob begged him to annex it for constant use.

But if trying at times, in his normal moods Kip was a desirable partner. He had the knack of managing natives, and would keep a whole caravan cheerful and up to the mark when others could only get obstinacy and sullen looks. He was plucky to a fault in his dealings with men, but inclined to be superstitious, and believed in omens and portents. Once, when prospecting for gold, he had refused to budge from his hut because a man had passed in the morning whistling the "Dead March."

The sun had set beyond the river, and the brief

The Ivory Raiders.

tropic twilight had faded before the three had rid themselves of the stains of travel and made their toilets. They were about to leave the room when there came a knock at the door, and the boy who had met them on the road entered with a tray on which was a square bottle of Hollands and a small brown decanter of bitters. Placing them on the table, he announced, "Dinner ready, five minutes, senhores," and departed.

"Strewth! If I don't believe I'm dreamin'," said Kip.

"It don't smell like a dream, sonny," said Anderson, who was examining the bottle. "But I'll soon tell you, as I never dreamt I was having a liquor without waking up with a shocking thirst just as I got the glass to my lips. And that"—he paused, with the air of one who grapples with the mighty problems of life—"and that, I reckon, is as grave an injustice as a man should have to put up with. No, sir, this ain't a dream, it's square-face, and here's luck to Mr. Max."

"Well, if this don't beat the Royal Hotel, Durban," cried Kip enthusiastically. "Lord, I feel as if I was going down, rigged out in store clothes, into the big dining-room, with the punkahs all a-flappin' and ice clinking in the drinks, and those Banyan coves with their beards parted in the middle"—Kip referred to the Sikh waiters—"wytin' to serve the curry and the rice. My eye,

Welcome Guests.

Bob, it don't seem as if this time yesterday we was wondering where we should sneak the next lot of spuds to go on with!"

They were once again in the highest spirits. True, they had lost their goods and equipments, and had suffered much; but for the present they were in clover, and fortune must turn some day. Laughing and chattering, they left the room, and found Max awaiting them in the dining-room. The meal that had been prepared would by no means have discredited the establishment referred to by Kip, for the cook had been expertly trained. Indeed, Max had to warn his guests not to make their dinner off the soup, which they would willingly have done. Then came a variety of dishes: fish, freshly caught from the river and cooked in different fashions; baked and stewed meats and poultry; sweet potatoes, with their tops cooked—an excellent substitute for spinach; tomatoes the size of cherries, and tiny cucumbers fried in oil. There seemed a hundred dishes to bewilder the diners! Even the curry came in its course, served with irreproachable rice, stewed limes and chillies, so that Kip was stimulated to begin afresh, and to acquit himself remarkably.

They were waited on by eager-eyed, active boys, superintended by a statuesque mulatto girl, who hovered about the door. She was gaudily and extravagantly dressed for her class; heavy ivory

The Ivory Raiders.

bangles clattered on her arms as she moved, and her hair, redolent of cocoanut-oil, was fastened by a massive tortoiseshell-comb. Though she saw that the requirements of the guests were fulfilled, her dark, gleaming eyes hardly left her master. Her manner towards the other servants was imperious and dominating.

At first the wanderers were too hungry to talk, nor did their host seem desirous of starting a conversation. He contented himself with a few civil words, and an observance of his guests. On their part, they put forward their best behaviour. Even Kip and Anderson had acquired good table manners, which they reserved for rare occasions, and they used their knives with discrimination. But presently, as the meal progressed, and the strong, red wine had twice made a circuit of the table, they began, in a disjointed fashion, to give an account of their wanderings. The Dutchman listened sympathetically.

"Ah," he said, "Makombi is a savage chief! Perhaps the worst in South Central Africa. Here we all know him, and know that it is dangerous to go into his country unless with a well-armed force. I wonder you were not warned against him before you started from Beira. That Portuguese was a fool. They all talk—how do you say?—through their neck. You may consider yourselves remarkably lucky that you escaped with your lives."

Welcome Guests.

Desborough looked amused.

"We hardly regarded it in that light," he said. "Luck seems a curious thing. There appear to be several assorted kinds. At present it is rather difficult to be thankful for anything but your courtesy. We were of opinion that we were the most unfortunate devils unhanged. Because we have merely been robbed of our goods, chucked out of the territory, and made to eat dirt on the road, you think we ought to be thankful for our mercies. But it takes a philosopher—or an onlooker—to adopt that attitude."

Max smiled enigmatically.

"Ah! Makombi often does much worse than killing."

"I'd like to twist his neck some day," growled Anderson, with his mouth full.

The meal ended at last; one by one the hungry men were satisfied. Max produced some Sumatran cigars, and they went out on the veranda, whither the boys brought glasses and the inevitable "square-face." For some time they smoked in silence. Max was engrossed in his thoughts, while his guests reclined on the comfortable chairs, taking long pulls at their cigars, watching with childish intentness the ash kindle to a glowing crimson and then die away. Materialists though they were, they were impressed by the beauty of the night. The crescent moon hung low in the sky. Her

The Ivory Raiders.

witchery had turned the upper reach of the river into a lake of gold, with a sombre margin of tufted tree-tops. The rising constellation of Orion had cleared the eastern hills, shedding a light which rivalled that of the moon. Only the darkling waters before them and the interspaces of the trees on the opposite bank held the darkness. To the north a long, low ridge cut off the horizon, and the country beyond held for them the mystery of the unknown. From beneath the overhanging banks of the Zambesi came strange splashings and an occasional snapping of jaws. In a huge pool in the river some hippopotami snorted restlessly, premeditating their nightly raid on land to root in the native gardens. Far back in the village a man played a Kaffir "piano." The wooden music came soft and rippling from the distance, and the droning choruses fell pleasantly on the ear.

Suddenly a strident noise pierced the harmony of the night, as some buglers and a drummer at the dilapidated fort struck up "The Last Post" most villainously on their instruments.

The noise broke rudely into the reverie of the four men. The "square-face" was passed round and glasses charged. Max started the conversation with a personal experience, a story telling how he had defrauded a native chief, not far from Orobo, of a number of head of cattle. On the whole it was an ignoble story, and he watched its effect on his

Welcome Guests.

audience. They listened with the charitable indulgence provoked by cigars and a good dinner. It was not to be expected that half-starved, destitute men, rescued from a humiliating position, would prove hypercritical. Two of his hearers, at least, had been brought up in an unscrupulous school, and the third had realised that most of his precepts found slight favour in a new country.

"That was a pretty smart deal," said Anderson, when Max had finished.

"Lordy, you did 'em to rights!" chuckled Kip. "I guess that's where we Englishmen make the bloomin' error. We've got too many interfering officials about who won't let a man alone to make a bit for himself, when he does get the chance."

"*Verdade!*" said Max. "No one professes to understand your English methods. Others come out here to make money; you seem to come to spend it."

"I suppose it is like this," said Bob lazily; "we don't let people collar things promiscuously because there is not enough to go round. It is meant to be share and share alike."

"Discouraging to the men that do the work," retorted Max. "But here, gentlemen, thank God, we are not under British rule." And he watched his guests narrowly. "There is freedom for enterprise here," he added.

The conversation became animated, and wandered

The Ivory Raiders.

over half the continent, inconsequently, from Port Elizabeth to Zanzibar. They had much to tell, as they had led adventurous lives and been oft-times in peril. Max talked the least, leaving it to the others to keep the ball rolling. This they did readily, Kip and Anderson telling stories of the maddest adventures in the most prosaic tones, relating incidents that covered the time from the Gaika War to the frontier trouble at Macequessi: stories always interesting, often humorous, and, it must be admitted, frequently discreditable.

Max listened appreciatively. Then, having felt his ground, he narrated other experiences, each wearing a more sinister aspect than the last, and he watched their effect on his hearers. He also kept the bottle moving. It is possible that, a month previously, they might have expressed disgust at some of his reminiscences, but after the treatment they had lately endured they felt reckless and hardened, and they painted their own misdoings in darker colours to match the stories of their host. Desborough noticed that Max drank moderately, whilst continually pressing liquor on the others, but he gave him the benefit of the doubt; it might be the Dutchman's notion of hospitality.

At last Anderson and Kip showed signs of drowsiness.

"Have you any plans for the future?" inquired Max, turning to Desborough.

Welcome Guests.

"Plans, senhor? I think we are rather tired of plans. Ours have gone so much astray lately. I fancy employment is what we are looking for."

Max assumed an expansive air.

"But perhaps it might be worth your while to undertake a commission? However, I will not worry you now. I notice your companions are completely worn out with their journey. Let us talk about the matter to-morrow. I expect you are all ready to turn in."

Bob roused his comrades. Anderson was simply worn out by fatigue, but Kip was muddled with drink as well. When they were alone in their room he waxed enthusiastic.

"G-ood ole Max-y! W-what a perfec' gen'leman for a bloomin' foreign'r . . . a bloomin', mouldy ole D-Dutchman. I'm qui' s'prised."

"You're right, my son," said Anderson. "He's one of the best; that's a cert."

Desborough was silent while he undressed, but before turning in he said, "I'm not so certain about our host. I'll give my opinion when I see his little bill."

"Bill?" blurted Kip, starting up anxiously. "W-we're guests. It's 'elp yerself an' 'ave another! Who's got to pay any b-bill?"

Anderson also looked surprised.

"I may be wrong, boys. But I fancy we have to pay for this entertainment in one way or another.

The Ivory Raiders.

Mine host doesn't appear the sort of man to give things away for nothing."

Kip seemed relieved that no direct charge was to be made, and said with maudlin severity, "Youra 'spishus, ungrateful beast, Robert. When a bill come, tellyer wor I'll do—I'll tel'graph my agents, Durban—settle—it. Jus' leave it orl t' yer uncle, boys. Goodnigh'!"

That night, before going to bed, Max, in an excellent frame of mind, sought Raphael in his store.

"Well?" asked Raphael. "Are your sheep likely to turn out goats, *amigo*?"

"Almighty, but they are made for us!" replied Max, sitting down. "We could not have picked better men this side of the Equator."

"But have you said anything to them yet?"

"No, they were too tired to-night, and one of them was inclined to get drunk." He drew a chair close to his partner, and continued: "Two of them are tough rascals, ready for any job with money in it. The third is of a different breed, but he has been pretty severely handled lately, and I think he is up to any devilment. He looks the sort of man to go through with anything he has set his hand to. I really place more hope on him than on the others. I don't want to appear to hurry this matter too much, so I shall leave them alone till to-morrow evening. They don't appear to have any money,

Welcome Guests.

so they can't get up to mischief, and I will tell Kalua to look after them well. I think this time, senhor, we are in luck."

"Well, we must go carefully, Max. It is a big risk. Big money, I admit, but a big risk."

"*Diabo!* but there's no risk at all, senhor," retorted Max impatiently. "And let me advise that a conscience is inconvenient at your age." He pulled his chair yet closer, and talked long and earnestly. And as Raphael listened, his anxious expression gave way to one of vulpine eagerness. At last Max rose to go. At the door he paused, and remarked:

"Yes, Chutika's village will be an excellent place to transfer the ivory if the Arabs will only wait. No one need hear of it, and our Englishmen can go from there direct to the coast. They need never be seen here again, and Smart will think the ivory has been spirited out of the country."

"But if they are unreasonable as to money, Max? Supposing they want more than we can give?"

"They will have to come to terms. It is the only chance they will get here, and they are not too particular."

"Five thousand rupees would be handsome, Max. Just fancy five thousand rupees for six weeks' work!"

"*Boa noite*, senhor. Go to sleep and dream of it," replied the other, shutting the door.

CHAPTER V.

MAX KLEIN'S STORY.

THE tired men had no thought of early rising the next morning. The unaccustomed comfort of their couches made them sleep on. The sun was above the veranda when Kip rose and sought the water-bottle; then he roused the others. They ascertained that their host had gone from home, leaving a note that he would be unable to return till evening, but that he had given instructions that his guests should be looked after to the best of his housekeeper's ability. His absence was rather a relief to them. Presently the lady of the many armlets, presumably the housekeeper, whose name was Kalua, brought coffee.

Later they strolled through the township. A post-office, a church, and a dozen dilapidated stone houses were set rectangularly to each other, intersected by wide dusty roads. The post-office would have dignified a busy seaport, but its transactions were conducted at a table in the corner of one spacious room. It was surrounded by an untended garden, wherein grew lime and orange-trees, and gaunt-looking palms. The houses had

Max Klein's Story.

been built long ago by men whose hopes had run high. Now, only the lower apartments were used, as stores, and the broad verandas were deserted, except by loafing negroes. Trade was carried on mainly by expeditions into the adjoining districts. The church had a front of exuberant ornamentation, deep-arched windows repaired with wood, and niches occupied by pathetically-grotesque figures of the saints. The interior was cavernous and musty, illuminated in patches by glimmering candles which threw their yellow glow on painted effigies in a somewhat better state of preservation than those outside. Fronting the river was an accumulation of stones and buildings surrounding a high flagstaff. This was the fort. A half-caste soldiery dozed and gambled away the hours, awaiting the infrequent calls to parade. Between the houses were rows of cabins inhabited by natives. Bunches of bananas and strips of meat were hanging to dry before the doors. On the doorsteps chocolate-hued, deep-breasted negresses sat weaving baskets and smoking maize-leaf cigarettes. They were dressed in blue or red calico skirts, and white camisas which partially concealed their bosoms, but left their magnificent arms and shoulders bare.

Half an hour sufficed for sightseeing, and the day dragged tediously. They could speak to no one, as they knew no Portuguese, and the kitchen-Kaffir that served in the south was ineffective here. Having

The Ivory Raiders.

no money they could get into no mischief. Doubtless some of the traders and storekeepers could have spoken English, but they shrank from making acquaintances, for in such places talking leads to saloons, a custom with which they had no quarrel in itself; but being penniless they could not have paid their share, and they held high notions on this score. They were therefore driven to spending the day in their own company at Max's house. Kalua was attentive to their wants, though discriminating in the dispensation of stimulants. Kip tried to come on terms of familiarity with her, with a comical lack of success. Towards evening Max returned, and apologised for his absence. He had intentionally kept away; partly because he wanted them to appreciate how dependent they were on his good offices; also because he considered the hour following dinner the most favourable for the disclosure of his scheme. Yet when the time arrived, he seemed to have nothing more important to discuss than the gossip of the town.

Desborough gave him ten minutes, then came abruptly to the point.

"You mentioned last night, senhor, that you might have a job to offer us. We don't want to sponge on you longer than necessary. Perhaps you will be kind enough to tell us what it is."

Max protested courteously that their presence

Max Klein's Story.

could only be a pleasure to him. Then he seemed to recall his offer with difficulty.

"Ah, yes. I dare say I did mention the possibility of our coming to a little arrangement. But perhaps I spoke incautiously. My plan may not be one to meet with your approval."

"I don't think you will find us very particular," said Anderson grimly.

Max gave himself a full minute for reflection.

"Well, perhaps if I tell you of an affair that happened to me some years ago, we may come to understand each other. It may be worth your listening, but warn me if I am tedious. Take a fresh cigar, gentlemen."

Pointing across the river, he began :

"Over there, several hundred kilometres distant, in almost unknown country not very far from Angoniland, dwell a branch of the Asenga, formerly under the rule of a black scoundrel named Msoro. He was what you call a theocratic chief, for besides being the civil head to his people, he was also their Melchisedek. Partly owing to superstition, and partly from a miserly instinct derived from his ancestors, large quantities of ivory had been collected by this tribe, and stored up. This had gone on for many generations. An Englishman who had been knocking about in that part of the country told me that the stockade of the chief's kraal was made of magnificent tusks, the least of

The Ivory Raiders.

them forty pounders! And that after deducting for those that had gone rotten they must have been worth fifteen thousand pounds of your money. Think of that in the possession of a bare-backed savage! Other reports placed the value far higher. This ivory had been yearly accumulated. It is the custom for the elephants to travel down towards the Zambesi in the dry weather, and return to the high country in the rainy season. To do this they must pass through Msoro's territory. In the days when the elephants were plentiful, the Asenga used to make a big hunt, and shoot and trap the animals, so that their hoard grew bigger. But of late years the elephants have become much scarcer and more difficult to entrap; nevertheless still a considerable amount of ivory is taken.

"As is only natural, efforts were made to trade with Msoro, but without success. He had a superstition that evil would visit the tribe if they parted with their precious tusks, and it made them watch it closely. At varying times some of the neighbouring tribes endeavoured to raid the ivory, but the Asenga were too strong for them. Their villages are well protected with ditches and mud-walls, or with dense thickets of spiny Euphorbia bushes, which are too much for men armed alone with spears and bows. The Englishman told me that the Asenga could put two thousand men in the field, armed after the native fashion; and from

Max Klein's Story.

what I myself saw later, I believe him. Once some devil-may-care Europeans attempted to raid the stuff, but they too failed. Msoro spotted their plan before they were ready to strike, and they just escaped with their lives.

"Now at first I did not believe all these yarns. But about five years ago, a little after my conversation with the Englishman, I went on a hunting-trip which took me up into Sengaland, and I determined to go and call upon Mr. Msoro. As I had only a few men with me and did not appear formidable, I was admitted to the chief's kraal. There I saw the ivory. And, my hat! I saw that it had not been over-valued. I tell you it was a noble sight; hundreds of beautiful tusks, many weighing as much as eighty and ninety pounds. It was iniquitous, my friends, to see it lying useless there. So I decided to use strategy and my wits to obtain it. I felt never to rest again till I had gained that ivory.

"Immediately I commenced to make plans, and agreed with Msoro to stop in his country for a month to hunt. There were some antelope about, so he was not suspicious. During this time I succeeded in making him my friend by giving him handsome presents, one of which was my own rifle. Then, when I considered the time was ripe, I made a proposal to him. I was to return again next year - at the time when the elephants pass into the

The Ivory Raiders.

country, with a band of my hunters properly armed and equipped for killing. We should make a big hunt. Msoro was to take the ground-tusk—that is the tusk taken from the side of the elephant which lies next the ground when he falls—and I was to take the other tusk. After three days' *indaba* Msoro agreed. The elephants were getting wilder and more difficult to kill every year, and, beside, he had recently traded a few tusks for some powder, shot, and calico for his women, so the old miser was keen to replace them. But he made several conditions, the crafty old fox!—one being to limit the number of my hunters to fifty; and after another *indaba* we came to terms, and I returned to Orobo.

“I tell you, my friends, I was a nervous man during the months that I had to wait before it was time for me to return to Sengaland. I feared to learn each day the news that someone had been there before me, but the time went by and I heard the ivory was still untouched.

“As the springtime came round I busied myself with getting my men together. I carefully selected two hundred of the most reckless and dare-devil Masungus—the half-castes along this river—arming them with the old rifles one can always pick up on the frontier towns. The commandant of the fort was my very good friend, and assisted me in this matter. He and I understand each other.

Max Klein's Story.

"My plan was simple. I intended, myself, to go with fifty of the Masungus straight up to Msoro's kraal by the most direct route, and camp on the spot where I had previously encamped, timing my arrival a week before the elephants were due, then to send my men out to make a pretence of scouting and keeping watch for the elephants. The rest of the gang, led by my *capitão*, were to travel by a more circular route. This *capitão* had accompanied me on my previous expedition. I instructed him to march well to the east of Msoro's territory, as if he were making for the lake—then to swing round and approach the villages from a north-easterly direction, and smuggle his men in some mountains not far from the kraals. The last part of his journey was to be made by night, no fires to be lighted, and great care taken to conceal his men by day. If he bungled this matter I swore to shoot him. Once there he was to signal to me by means of fires just before dawn, when the villagers would be asleep.

"Two facts made my arrangements easy of execution. Msoro had raided and devastated all the country for fifty miles round his kraals, accordingly my men could approach without danger of being observed. Though watch was kept to the north, west and south, the Asenga feared no trouble from the east, since there are no powerful tribes in that direction. Also it was the season when the natives are busy

The Ivory Raiders.

hoeing their millet-fields, and as this duty falls upon all the tribes alike at the same time, they do not fear each other until after the harvest. I therefore saw no reason to suppose that my men would come across any raiding parties to give the alarm.

“I had noted on my first expedition that the Asenga lived in a dozen large villages situated close to each other. True, there were a few outlying kraals, but these I had marked on a map, and my *capitão* knew them well and how to avoid them. The mountains lay some four miles north of the kraals, and once the men had hidden themselves there was little fear of their being seen. My plan was that when my men were in the mountains, I should send word to the others who were out scouting, and towards daybreak we should draw within striking distance. Then, pouf! . . . a sharp attack, a little fire among the thatches of the huts, a light breeze, and the day was ours! . . . for, I tell you, these half-castes are demons at a winning fight, and once the chief kraal was captured we had nothing to fear. A few men well armed would be able to defend it. In the confusion I intended, with the rest of the men, to take and burn the other villages. The Asenga would be broken and scattered before they knew our numbers. As you know, these natives make but a poor resistance by night, and once the ivory was in our hands, I tell you, I knew how to defend it. Spears

Max Klein's Story.

and bows and arrows have no chance against rifles. The transport of the ivory was another matter, but I relied on catching sufficient women and children to carry away the tusks. As bearers, they can be made equal to men.

“ In the earlier stages everything went magnificently, and one day I found myself camped outside Msoro's kraal, waiting for the signal to tell me the rest of my party had arrived and hidden themselves in the mountains. The men that had travelled with me were hunting in the neighbourhood with a great demonstration of enthusiasm, yet within a day's march, and keeping a good look-out for the signals that were to recall them.

“ It was on the third night after my arrival. All the natives had long gone to sleep, and I, watching, saw a small fire peep up on the mountains. It burned steadily for a minute, and then went out. A few seconds later it blazed again, and burned for a longer period, and again went out; but before the last gleam had died a third fire was lighted a little to the left. This was the signal we had arranged, and had any of the Asenga seen it they would simply have thought it was made by some of their people clearing the bush. I went to the embers of my fire, and kicked them carelessly. The sparks spurted up into the darkness like fireworks. We had agreed that if I did this once, all was well, and the attack was to be the next night. If I

The Ivory Raiders.

kicked twice, then those in the hills were to await further instructions. As all was ready I signalled once, and turned in contentedly.

"The next morning, to keep Msoro in a good temper, I sent him a more handsome present than usual, and in return received a fine ox, which showed that he was still without suspicion. During the day the hunters dropped in casually by twos and by threes, and before noon all were at hand, or within easy call, scattered among the villages. One of the Masungus had managed to communicate with the men in the hills. He had reported that all was well, and that my *capitão* sent word that when the natives were asleep they would creep within gunshot and await the signal to attack. Everything was prepared, and I could do nothing until night. It seemed as if the worth of that ivory was already in my pocket.

"At midday I sat awaiting my meal and going over in my mind, for the hundredth time, the final arrangements. Suddenly I noticed my men peering curiously along the path that led to the east. At the same moment my ear caught the distinct, though distant, sound of a stick beating on hollow wood, and I heard, faintly, a cry which every traveller in this part of Africa well knows. It was the cry of **machilla*-bearers as they hurry

* A *machilla* is a hammock slung on a pole, in which many Europeans travel in tropical Africa.

Max Klein's Story.

along the path, and I knew that the beating of wood was caused by the bearers hitting the *machilla*-pole with their sticks. God, how I cursed, for only Europeans travel in this manner.

"Then I thought rapidly, and decided that, cost what it might, I was not going to be baulked at the eleventh hour. There was one way to get rid of an unwelcome arrival. I would warn Msoro that he came with evil design against his ivory, and get him chucked out of the country. I decided to do this, but even as I made up my mind the *machilla*-men could be seen breasting the ridge, and come charging down the slope right towards my camp. Running in front of the bearers were a dozen boys carrying guns, dressed in a sort of sepoy uniform ; and following, came some more men dressed in a uniform which I knew to belong to one of your Indian native regiments. There was no mistaking the newcomer—it was Smart, and I tell you I cursed the fate that sent him !

"The bearers came rushing on in their usual fashion. Two men carried the pole at a time : then without stopping two more would dash up, slip their shoulders under the end, and rush on like madmen, hitting the bamboo with sticks and shouting in their silly fashion, while the released men scampered along in front. Smart knew how to travel : I will say he always had good men. They came straight for my nett, as though they knew I was there, and stopped,

The Ivory Raiders.

resting one end of the pole on the ground within ten feet of my chair. And Mr. Smart stepped out of the hammock as coolly as if he were alighting from a first-class railway carriage at one of your London termini. I tell you it made my blood surge. He was dressed as if he expected to find ladies' society at my camp—those infernal baggy riding-breeches, a white shirt, and a beautiful tie; and he wore a white scarf tied round his hat. He had even shaved that morning, and carried one of those ridiculous eyeglasses stuck in his eye, for all the world as if he had been born with it.

"I had made up my mind to be civil to him, because possibly he only intended to stop for a few hours. He was noted for making rapid forced marches across the country. So I held out my hand and said: 'Good morning, Mr. Smart, pleased to see you. Have you travelled far to-day? Have a drink?' But my gentleman did not take my hand: he only took out his case and lit a cigarette, without offering me one. Then I knew something was wrong. In a moment he said: 'We're going to talk first. I'll have a drink and shake hands afterwards, if you still feel inclined; but it is business before whisky. What are you doing here?'

"I was enraged at this disdain and impertinence, and was about to make an angry reply, when I noticed that many more Sikhs, all armed, were

Max Klein's Story.

rapidly coming over the hill. I estimated there could not be less than fifty. While I was looking at them, Smart blew cigarette-smoke through his nose. Then he spoke again.

“‘Thought it was you, but wasn't quite sure. Glad I'm in time. I've come over two hundred miles for the pleasure of meeting you. Now then, what are you doing here?’ I tell you I was not enjoying myself. I would have given half of Msoro's ivory to have struck him in the face, but he was too strong, so I tried bluff.

“‘What's that to do with you? It isn't your country, and you needn't think it.’ But he only smiled in his irritating way, and pointed to a stream that rose in the mountain where my men were hidden.

“‘See that stream? Well, it runs into the lake, and you know I'm running all the watershed on this side.’

“Then I thought *he* was bluffing, so I retorted, stiffly, ‘It isn't; it's Portuguese territory, and you know it.’ But he only stood there like a grinning mud image and said:

“‘It was till the Berlin Treaty. It's British now, Mr. Klein. Tell me what you are doing with armed men in my country?’

“I still managed to withhold my temper, though I cursed more deeply under my breath. There was a chance I might deceive him, so I said, shortly:

The Ivory Raiders.

‘Hunting and trading.’ But he was too knowing, and replied :

“ ‘That’s a lie ! Too many guns and too little stuff. Try again, senhor.’ Now he could only see about thirty of my men, and I thought I had him, so I said :

“ ‘I have under fifty guns with me, senhor ; that is not many for this part of the world ; you took care to have a lot more, I notice. You don’t seem to favour going about alone.’ But he only laughed again in his infernal complacent style, and said : ‘Oh, I need ’em when I’m looking after chaps like you. But how about your ragamuffins lying back in those hills?’ Then I tell you I was staggered. But I did not know whether he had only made a lucky shot, so I said : ‘You think you know a hell of a lot!’ I wanted to make him angry, anything, as his manner exasperated me, but he stood there as if amused, and said :

“ ‘Yes, the natives give me a name which means something like that.’ Then he got stern, and spoke stiffly. ‘Now look here, Max Klein, I’m not going to have any of your damned nonsense. You’re here to raid Msoro’s ivory. I’m here to stop it—and I’m top dog ! Now I give you just two hours to clear your whole caravan out of my country ; savvy ?’

“Then my rage began to get the better of me, so I shouted : ‘And if I won’t?’

Max Klein's Story.

“‘Then I tell Msoro the whole game, and it's two to one he'll set on to you at once, and I'm hanged if I'll stop him if he does.’

“‘Two can play at that game, my friend,’ I shouted. ‘Supposing I tell Msoro you are here for the same game, what then?’ I meant to fight it out to the end, but I don't believe the man has any nerves, because his face didn't move, and he kept that stupid glass thing stuck in his eye as he replied :

“‘I should say he is likely to believe you, my son, when he hears about your pals hidden in the mountains.’

“Then I threw caution to the winds and cursed at him.

“‘I'll see you in hell first,’ I shouted, shaking my fist. ‘I fight you and your whole crew.’ But your English is a very ineffective language for cursing, so I called him by every Dutch oath and filthy Kaffir word I could think of, and the hound stood there laughing at me. I tell you it was all I could do to keep from striking him. And he said, as cool as if he were speaking to a schoolgirl :

“‘I shouldn't like your chance in a fight, Max : I've got this gang of yours pretty well covered, and I guess Msoro will do for the other lot in the hills, if they show themselves in daylight.’ Then he looked at his Sikhs, and I could not help looking too.

The Ivory Raiders.

“‘Fine body of men, aren’t they?’ he asked with pride, as though he really wished my opinion. But he spoke truly. Those lean, brown devils were watching every action we made, and only waiting the word to start shooting. I knew they were straight shots and that my men were no match for them, so I stood there before him like a nigger about to be beaten, though I swore that one day I would be even with him. Then he said, in his irritatingly pleasant way:

“‘You’re wasting valuable time, Herr Klein,’ and he looked at his watch; ‘it’s only one hour and fifty-five minutes now.’

“I felt the game was up, as I knew he was a man of his word, so I called to my *capitão* and gave him instructions to strike camp. As I walked away, Smart drawled out:

“‘You needn’t worry about telling those chaps on the hills. I sent a couple of men an hour ago to say I was letting Msoro’s crowd loose on them, and they’ll be cutting back to the Zambesi like a herd of cattle by now.’

“Within the two hours I and my men were returning towards the Zambesi. I tell you I had murder in my heart, but he was too strong for me, though I promised that one day I would be revenged on the meddler. I tell you, it makes me writhe when I think of that man going in and telling Msoro about what he had done.”

Max Klein's Story.

As Max narrated the last part of his story he became agitated: his face twitched and his hands clasped and unclasped the arms of his chair. He had spoken with the most cynical freedom, glozing nothing, as one who expects his audience to be in sympathy with him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEAL.

KIP was the first to break the pause that came at the end of the story. "My! that Smart's a 'cute devil," he said, admiringly, "but 'ow did he know about you bein' there?"

"I think he had men at that time in Orobo spying to see whether the Portuguese were selling guns and powder to the natives for use in British Central Africa. They sent word that a big expedition had set out for the north, giving the number of the men. The destination was not a very close secret. Smart himself had tried to buy Msoro's ivory, so he guessed the rest. I could never make out how he came to know of the men hidden in the mountains, but he has a wonderful faculty for gaining information. Perhaps he judged by what he would have done himself."

The four men smoked assiduously. Though, so far, Max had made no proposal, they now realised what was expected of them, and unconsciously their attitude changed. It had been, hitherto, that of guests towards host, and they had listened appreciatively. Now they felt that they were no longer

The Deal.

simple guests, but one of two parties about to drive a hazardous bargain, in which each must be on his guard. At last Max spoke, and his tone was insinuating.

"That ivory is there still."

"So's Smart and his bloomin' old Sikhs," said Kip, "and I ain't anxious to meet them. They seem a nasty, unwholesome, interfering lot of men."

"No! Smart is now away in England for a year. His deputy has managed to raise native trouble north of the Lake, and he and all the fighting men have their hands pretty full there. They are hundreds of miles away."

"Old Msoro 'll be a bit suspicious of any new outfits coming up, though," said Anderson.

"Msoro died a short time ago, and Tembe, his son, is now chief. The last news I had was that the two brothers were quarrelling, and the tribe divided. They would be suspicious of me or of any Portuguese, but not, I think, of Englishmen. Thanks to that infernal Smart, they regard them differently. Anyone entering the country from an easterly direction would be well received. It is the right season of the year, too."

Max absent-mindedly passed the bottle. Kip helped himself, then lay back in his chair and grinned.

"It's a pity a fortune should waste its fragrance on the bloomin' desert air."

The Ivory Raiders.

"It will not for long," said Max. "The wonder is it hasn't been captured before. If we do not take it, somebody else will. Since the Asenga are fighting amongst themselves, the Angoni or Arabs will soon step in and help themselves."

The three grew taciturn. They had learned that, when bargaining, silence is the quickest way to make an opponent show his hand. Presently Max said:

"Should you three gentlemen care for the enterprise I think it should prove an easy matter. If you went up with a company of Masungus you would now have little difficulty in—er—collecting the ivory. The tribe is much weakened by fighting."

"And bring it back here?" asked Desborough.

"No, that would not do now; there are too many steamers on the river; and those cursed gunboats! They spoil honest trading. But I and my partner could meet you at a place that I will point out on a map, with a caravan of Arabs. I believe they are now coming up the country. To them we should entrust the ivory, and they can smuggle it through to the coast by a way they alone know, and ship it in their dhows to Aden or Zanzibar. Your bargain would finish at this place I mention."

"You seem to have thought the matter out pretty well, senhor," said Desborough.

Max shrugged his shoulders. "I have thought over it for years. Almost every day since I had

The Deal.

such vile luck myself. I have been waiting and wishing for someone to come who would assist me in the matter, but though many strangers have been here you are the first I felt I could trust. It was no good attempting to go again myself; but I can arrange that there is no trouble at this end, and, if you go, you need not return to this part; you can go direct to the coast by the Shiré."

There was another long pause while the three thought eagerly.

"It'll be a big sum of money for you to collect from the Arabs, won't it," suggested Anderson, presently.

"Large sum? Yes. Perhaps my partner may decide to accompany the caravan and see it through. He is a wonderful man at that kind of work; he knows every Arab trader of importance between Beira and Port Said. But as for the amount, few people suspect the importance of some of the dealings transacted with these Arabs, or the sums of money that change hands."

Again there was a silence. Then Desborough put the question that was uppermost in the minds of everyone.

"What are you willing to pay if we put this job through? It's going to be dangerous."

Max reflected. "We will pay a good commission on what you bring. But I had better consult my partner."

The Ivory Raiders.

Then up spoke David Anderson in a tone that showed that he, at any rate, had made up his mind. "It's going to be halves if I am to have anything to do with it. Halves on the value of the stuff as we hand it over—and at the market price here in Orobo, nine shillings a pound, I reckon."

Max flushed angrily. "*Diabo!* But you do not understand. Halves? And at nine shillings a pound? Why, in calculating the value I only reckoned on six shillings a pound. The Arabs would give no more."

"It's nine shillings in any part of the territory," said Desborough.

"Yes! Nine shillings for ivory bought and traded openly; but, pardon me, this is a different matter; we do not propose to ask a British or a Portuguese gunboat to send an escort to see it safely down to the coast. We have to take the risk of getting it through."

"The profits are bigger, though, when you have got it through," Bob insisted.

They haggled in spirited fashion; Max offering low prices as though he were granting a favour; the others standing out for half the value of the ivory. The largeness of the stakes and the hazardous nature of the enterprise made them strike hard for a good bargain. Max contested that he and his partner risked a large sum in equipping the expedition; the others retorted that they risked their

The Deal.

lives, or worse, they ran a chance of spending the remainder of them in gaol.

As the chaffering proceeded, Max retorted with less animation; his strokes and parries lost their sting. He grew preoccupied, giving answers unworthy of the dexterity of an apprentice, and the strife flagged for want of effective opposition. At last he rose from his chair, and with an air of heavy geniality said:

"Gentlemen, you drive a hard bargain, but I cannot blame you. To tell you the truth, I have set my mind on possessing this ivory; more, perhaps, to be revenged upon Smart than because I wish to make money. If my partner consents, I make you this offer: Should the expedition be successful, as I am sure it will be, I am willing to give you half; but valuing the ivory at six shillings a pound. That is the price we shall sell it at. At that rate your share should be at least six thousand pounds English money—a very handsome remuneration. I now go to consult my partner and leave you to think the matter over. Understand, it is my last word. Presently we will return together. If you consent, we can make our plans."

When the Dutchman's figure had passed through the gateway Anderson and Kip sprang from their chairs ablaze with excitement. There was no doubt as to their minds being made up.

"Six thousand pounds for a three months' job!

The Ivory Raiders.

Why, it beats gold mining hollow," ejaculated Anderson.

"Why, we'll be down in Durban spendin' the money in three months," cried Kip. "Hooray! I saw a nigger with a split lip this morning, and I knew there was luck waiting for us somewhere. What do you think of it, Bobbie?"

Robert Desborough was thinking that it was a queer undertaking for a possible parliamentary candidate, but he did not say so. He had not mentioned his affairs or his father's cablegram to his comrades. For their part they merely regarded him as one of the many cultivated young Englishmen, so plentiful in the colonies, who have had a sufficient but incommunicable reason for leaving home. And it was a point in good manners not to be inquisitive.

But Bob was captivated by the proposal as strongly as his comrades, though the stakes had nothing to do with it. What galled him most sorely in looking back on his failures was their abstract nature. On his prospecting trips he had not discovered even an unprofitable reef. He had gone soldiering, burning to give or take one vigorous blow, and the enemy had proved as elusive as the gold, whilst his efforts as a speculator had brought him in contact with nothing more concrete than some papers of figures and the names of mines he had never seen! He seemed to have expended his

The Deal.

resources in tilting at the air, and he even envied the old Spanish don the honest shock he received when he shattered his lance against the windmill.

But there was nothing intangible about the adventure before them. There was like enough to be plenty of hard knocks and a solid prize to fight for. It seemed to offer him his first chance of proving his mettle. At the time neither he nor his comrades saw the sinister side of the business. They were still smarting from the malignant treatment they had received from Makombi, and they were aching to get even with him or somebody like him.

Now they saw their way to picturesque vengeance, and Bob thought no worse of the matter than that he was like a knight of old going forth to fight somebody for something that he wanted! Consequently, he replied to Kip's question cheerfully, "I'm game if you chaps are."

"Well," said Kip, "we'd better put our thinkin' caps on before old Maxy comes back, and fix up a plan. 'E's as slippery as an eel. I can see that out of the corner of my eye."

* * * * *

Raphael was writing at an untidy desk in an untidy room. A litter of trading goods was heaped against the wall—blankets, calicoes, and gaudy print stuffs. The dinner things had not been removed, and there was an unpleasant smell of

The Ivory Raiders.

curry in the air. A spirit decanter and three dirty glasses showed that a bargain had recently been completed and sanctified according to the manner of the country. A rat glided across the floor with the assurance of a householder returning home with his latchkey in his pocket, but as it peeped beneath the nearest blanket it whisked its tail and scampered in the opposite direction. The writer had an interest in the time, for every few minutes he glanced towards the clock. At last he leaned back and stretched, putting himself a question, "Does a long talk mean good or bad news?"

A quick, heavy footfall struck the veranda steps. Max entered in no very amiable temper.

"Well," asked Raphael, "have our goats turned into sheep again?" He spoke in Portuguese, his usual habit.

"They've stuck out for halves," blurted Max. "Halves at the market price."

Raphael turned to his book to hide a smile. He was amused that his partner did not gain his way as readily as he had anticipated. Still, he was indignant at his information.

"I presume you explained to them that you lived here for philanthropic purposes, and have placed your house at their disposal?"

"I told them they might have halves, only at six shillings a pound."

The Jew faced round. There was evidently

The Deal.

something he did not understand in Max's prodigality.

"Well, at this rate I see you starting a home for the destitute."

"But," said Max rather moodily, "I don't see why we should pay it."

"Then I think I will leave the deal to you," snapped Raphael. "This business is going to be risky enough without having three swindled men talking through the country afterwards. And I don't do business of this sort on the halves-sharing profit principle you talk about. No, senhor, find your own Arabs, and carry this out yourself."

But Max needed his partner's assistance.

"They won't talk afterwards, because they would be the first to get into trouble, my friend."

"I wouldn't trust them. Besides they could write and make mischief, when they were clear of the country."

Without contesting the point Max lit a cigarette and inhaled the smoke. He was contemplating a map of the adjacent territory that hung on the wall. Raphael watched him peevishly.

"Well, senhor?" he said at length.

The other awoke from his abstraction. "The ivory is to be handed to us at Chutika. Chutika, as a village, has possibilities—its situation is peculiar." He spoke of the village by the name

The Ivory Raiders.

of the head-man, a creature of his. Raphael also fixed his eyes on the map.

"Have you ever travelled in the country to the eastwards?" asked Max.

The Jew shook his forefinger. "Few people have."

"The man that made that chart has imagination. Those fine-looking, abundant rivers don't exist. After the rains there are streams, but they empty in a few hours."

"And I've heard that rains seldom favour that district," ventured Raphael, who was catching the scent.

"They can't be relied on even in the wet season . . . which is past. More than one man has lost his life in trying to cross that wilderness without a guide."

Again a silence intervened.

"*Diabo!* what's that?" ejaculated Max. It was the rat, which had summoned courage to make a second effort to reach its hole.

"You are nervous, senhor," sneered Raphael, who was nevertheless thankful to find his comrade in the same plight as himself.

"We shall pay our friends by drafts," resumed Max. "They are suspicious dogs, and will make blindly for the coast by the shortest route eastwards, in order to convert them into cash."

The Deal.

"Are there no water-holes?" queried Raphael, keeping his eyes on the map.

"A few, but in unlikely places. A stranger would never find them."

"But if they had a guide?"

"They shall have one. I've thought of that. Chutika shall guide them."

"It is possible," suggested Raphael, who was testing the scheme link by link, "that they may insist on returning with us here!"

"We can tell them the Commandant has got wind of their doings. No; they will make like crows for Chindi."

"And if by an—accident they get there What then?"

Max laughed derisively. "Then we must be content with a merchant's profit, my friend."

"You have quite made up your mind?" queried Raphael, after a pause.

"Quite. It is a pity, but they should have been reasonable. After all, it is not our concern. We pay like honest men. We cannot help their ignorance of the country, any more than their greediness. Poor Chutika will have a bad time, but he can take care of himself at the last. But, come, Senhor, and make their acquaintance. Pull yourself together, man, you are looking queer."

"Just one little drink before we start, my friend," said the other, taking the bottle. "There is no

The Ivory Raiders.

water, but we will drink it neat. And, Max, when they start on that march, it might be advisable to give them a bottle of this to take with them."

Max Klein introduced his partner, and Raphael bowed and smiled in his best manner.

"My good friend, Senhor Max, tells me that we shall do a little business together. That is good. It should, I think, be profitable for all of us."

"No doubt it's goin' to be bloomin' good biz for you, Shylock," said Kip unceremoniously. "We do the work and take the risk, and you sit in the shade and get fat on it, eh?"

Raphael preferred to take this remark as a compliment.

"No; no risk, my friends, a pleasant trip up country; one bold stroke, a quick return, and you have made a small fortune in a few weeks. Then for Durban, and what you English call a 'high old bust,' eh?"

"It's goin' to be a beanfeast, ain't it?" said Kip with a grin. "Come along, mates, now let's draw up the agreement."

The Jew cast an uneasy glance at Max. There had been no word of an agreement. Then he said:

"Ah! but we are all good friends, and can trust one another. Why put things on paper? Writing is always dangerous."

Desborough turned to him with his pleasant smile. "It is really good of you to class us among

The Deal.

your friends on so short an acquaintance, but we might be a little forgetful. It would be most trying to you if, when we came to settle up, we asked for more than our share. It would cut you to the heart to refuse it—would it not? To prevent any such unpleasantness we can each put our hands to a little informal document.”

Here Max intervened, feeling that objection to an agreement might make them distrustful.

“Pardon me, gentlemen, but I think my friend does not wholly understand your English. You occasionally speak idiomatically.” Then, turning to Raphael, he said rapidly in Portuguese, “Keep quiet, you fool! Don’t you see they will have to give their childish agreement up again when we settle accounts? and for their own sakes they aren’t likely to show it to anyone before they start. Pull yourself together, and don’t let your timidity spoil everything.”

Rather frightened, Raphael endeavoured to look benevolent. “Oh, yes, gentlemen, I understand what you mean! You want what you call ‘a deed of partnership?’”

“You’ve hit it, Moses,” said Kip, who refused to take the new arrival respectfully. They went from the veranda to the room Max used as an office. Here Kip, who fancied his penmanship and erudition, sat down at the desk and squared his arms. Lucidly and clearly, omitting nothing,

The Ivory Raiders.

he set down on a sheet of common note-paper the clauses that they had agreed upon.

As he wrote, Max suggested that, in case the paper fell into other people's hands, it was inadvisable to express the terms quite so openly; while Raphael was unable to conceal his dissatisfaction at their being written down in any form. But Kip was obdurate, and took a mischievous delight in stating everything in the plainest language.

"I reckon we've got to have it all down ship-shape and clear, so why shouldn't we call the bloomin' ole shovel a spade? You don't suppose we want to flourish it in the Commandant's face when he asks us to tea, do you?"

"I'll keep a sharp eye on them till they are well up country," muttered Max to his friend, "and see they have no chance of making mischief."

There was one clause over which they still haggled, the one referring to the manner of payment. The trio stipulated for cash or notes on the handing over of the ivory. Max protested that it was out of the question to collect so large a sum in such an isolated spot, offering to pay by a draft on a bank at Chindi. The others advanced that they would need funds before they could change the draft. At last, after a stiff argument, Max conceded somewhat ungraciously that ten per cent. of the money should be paid in cash—the rest by draft. This was only agreed to by Raphael after

The Deal.

Max—under pretence of making the matter clearer by putting it into Portuguese—had told him that Chutika might be able to recover the money by tracking the men to the end. In fact, he suggested it should form his reward, making the guide's interest identical to theirs.

When the document was completed, Bob took the pen, and with a bow handed it to Max.

"I had the pleasure to-day of noticing your signature at your store. Perhaps you will be so good as to affix it to this document."

The Dutchman flushed angrily, but the bluff succeeded, and with as good grace as he could muster signed in his customary manner.

Bob then turned to the Jew.

"Mr. Klein will doubtless witness that you do the same, senhor."

"You are very suspicious, my friend," sneered Max.

With nervous hands the Jew signed, conscious that his partner's eyes were fixing him with a look that vowed vengeance if he shirked his responsibility.

"There," said Desborough, folding the paper, and placing it in an envelope which he passed to Kip, "I think all's square and ship-shape. If you want a copy you are welcome to make one, and we'll sign."

"We are perfectly willing to trust you," returned

The Ivory Raiders.

Max, loftily. "Now, gentlemen, the only thing left to settle is, when will you start?"

"The sooner the better," said Anderson.

"Shall we say Wednesday afternoon?" suggested Max.

"Can't yer wait till Saturday?" said Kip. "'Cause you told us the *Crocodile* is coming up on Friday, and the engineer aboard's a mate of mine what I 'aven't seen for a long time. We might all have a last drunk together.

Max and the Jew exchanged glances.

"Wednesday afternoon at the latest, gentlemen. Mr. Anderson is right—the sooner the better. It will be safer for all of us. The quicker you get away the less talk there will be."

"But you can't outfit us properly in that time," objected Kip.

Max was very decided. "There will be ample time, my friends. All the goods are here. Tomorrow morning I send my boy to my *prazos* (farms), and by Tuesday night there will be here fifty carriers ready to start. Binzi, one of the Masungus, who will act as your *capitão*, will have instructions to meet you on the road, say some twenty miles from here, with one hundred and fifty Masungus. They will place themselves under your command. It will cause less comment if they meet you on the road than if you all assembled here. As for the people in Orobo,

The Deal.

I will take care that they think you go hunting simply."

"But 'ow about an interpreter? We ain't bloomin' linguists," queried Kip.

"I will find you an excellent interpreter who speaks both English, Portuguese, and the native dialects. I also provide you with a sketch-map that I have made, showing the camping places *en route* where good water may be obtained at this time of year. Moreover, some of the men that will accompany you have been in the country before. Now with regard to your plan of campaign; a final decision must rest with you, but I would advise that when you get to the uninhabited country, about fifty miles from Senga-land, you work on my old principle. Divide your force, sending the greater portion of the Masungus by a north-easterly route to take up secretly a position in the hills to the north of the country in the same manner that I did. This I have proved can be done with proper care. Then you three gentlemen should go with only a few men and ingratiate yourselves with Tembe; but, above all things, don't let him suspect that you have come from here. Swing well round and approach the country as though you had come from one of the lake settlements of the English missionaries.

"You can then state that you are making for Lake Mweru to shoot elephant, and that you wish

The Ivory Raiders.

to buy food for your carriers. This will seem reasonable. I will provide you with plenty of calico and blankets for presents and trade, and I would advise that you give freely. Tembe will certainly give you leave to rest a week at his kraal to buy food for the men, as he will be greedy to obtain your calico. When you have thoroughly reconnoitred you can communicate with the rest of your party hidden in the hills. Then just one bold stroke, and all is over. Is it not easy, my friend?" he said, laying his hand affectionately on Desborough's arm.

Bob removed his arm; nevertheless, he nodded acquiescence. Max's eyes glistened. At last he was on his way to accomplish his long-cherished desire. He felt he had won the first part of the battle.

These preliminaries being settled, restraint was relaxed, and there was a tendency in the party to become convivial. Raphael would have escaped, but he was hauled back. Healths were proposed and drunk enthusiastically, and their host became a model of geniality. Later, when they became hilarious, the Jew was placed upon the table and forced to sing, the others threatening to throw bananas at him if he looked dismal. Kip, for his supreme edification, recited, with a hideous Cockney twang, part of a scene from "The Merchant of Venice," a recitation for which he had gained a

The Deal.

prize when a boy at school ; and the Dutchman sang uproarious drinking songs, the sentiments of which the whole party zealously applauded. It was early the next morning before they broke up and, with difficulty, found their couches.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FLYING AFRICAN.

Now it happened that about the time Robert Desborough and his comrades were leaving Beira on their ill-fated expedition to Makombi's country, his father, Samuel Desborough, made one of his rare intrusions into society. It also fell to his lot to find himself next to Mrs. Mauprey at the dinner table.

The lady whom he had taken in gave him the patronage of her conversation during the first two courses, after which, to his disembarrassment, she diverted the flow of her platitudes to the more appreciative ear of an archdeacon on her left. Mr. Desborough promptly turned to Mrs. Mauprey.

"I was greatly obliged to you for your courtesy in telling me you had terminated your engagement with Robert."

Mrs. Mauprey turned her eyes languidly towards the point of his chin.

"You were not sorry to hear it, I fancy."

"I was not. I could not convince myself that you and Bob were suited to each other. But kindly credit me, my dear lady, that in making this remark

The Flying African.

I am aware that any disability that may exist lies wholly with my son." The high-pitched laughter and chatter around the table gave privacy to their conversation.

"My age was a disqualification, I believe," she suggested after a minute, allowing her eyes to challenge his.

"Bob never told you that, I'll swear," he retorted.

"He did! Of course I found out you disapproved, and the poor boy had to admit the obstacle, lest I should conclude there was a worse behind."

Mr. Desborough looked at her with some admiration.

"What a pity—er—Robert isn't ten years older," he remarked.

She made a slight grimace, but he went on rapidly:

"I want your opinion. In sending Bob to Africa I seem to have overshot the mark a little. As luck will have it, the sitting member for our division is about to retire. Immediately I heard this I consulted Lord Luton on the matter, and asked him what he thought of Bob as a candidate. The boy was always a favourite of his. He replied that if I got him into the House he would make him his private secretary. My influence at Brickham counts, as you know, for a good deal. It is the chance of the boy's lifetime, and how does he take it? He

The Ivory Raiders.

calmly replies to my wire that he is off on a twopenny-halfpenny trading expedition into some unheard-of country, and cannot be bothered with anything else till he returns."

Mrs. Mauprey looked at the speaker with undisguised amusement.

"It is so inconvenient when one's well-laid schemes get out of hand, isn't it?" she said.

"I don't regret sending him," returned Mr. Desborough. "Bob has found his level in a marvellously short time. It would have cost him thousands of pounds and many years of disappointment to have learned as much in England. Perhaps he would never have gained the knowledge. But I am anxious on one point. May I put it to you plainly? My fear is this: the rupture may have been taken by him rather acutely, and led him to adopt some rash enterprise."

Mrs. Mauprey was a woman who could laugh musically. In spite of his perplexity, Mr. Desborough made a mental note of the fact.

"You would not be uneasy if you read his last letters. Instead of making love to me in them—passionately, hopelessly or recklessly, as he should have done—he did nothing but worry about his own incompetence, and talk of reefs and outcrops. No woman could stand that."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Desborough, in a tone of unsympathetic relief.

The Flying African.

"Don't trouble about him. He will come home when he sees fit," she added.

"But about the seat?" he queried. "A vacancy may not occur again for many years. As you know, it is a pocket borough, and once a man is adopted he can stop there till he becomes petrified with age, if he likes. Six, or even three months hence, and the door may be shut for a generation."

"It is perfectly simple. Take it yourself and abdicate when Bob condescends to return. I will come and help you canvass. The people there know me fairly well."

"My dear lady, you interpret my thoughts, and your assistance would put any contest beyond a doubt. I dislike the thought of entering the House, but I must do it for Bob's sake. I confess I feel uneasy, though, that he did not return on receiving my wire. He must have had enough of roughing it by now."

"I wonder if my cousin could assist you. Have you never met him—Archibald Smart? He is sitting opposite you. I call him an African maniac, because he endeavours to administrate the heathen in some part of the wilderness near, I believe, where Bob is. Talk to him when we are exiled to the drawing-room. He looks supremely bored."

Mr. Desborough glanced across the table and observed, not for the first time, a resolute-looking

The Ivory Raiders.

man of about forty, with a clean-shaven face and sallow complexion. His attire manifested a scrupulous attention to the least detail. He wore an eye-glass, through which he seemed to look upon the world in general with amused interrogation, whilst reserving a steady conviction as to his own potentiality. It occurred to Mr. Desborough, as he surveyed him, that there were two men in the room capable of shaping the affairs of their fellow-creatures—and the other was Mr. Archibald Smart.

"He is an uncommon man," he remarked to Mrs. Mauprey. "Seems out of place in this set. What made him come?"

"A rash promise, given a month ago, I fancy. And he has a way of keeping his promises."

But when the men were left alone the archdeacon forestalled Mr. Desborough. He had his views on mission-work to propound, and the commissioner listened to them amiably, as the continuance of a task of supererogation. Violet Mauprey came to the rescue in the drawing-room, however. She drew the two men into a recess and started the topic without waste of time.

"Mr. Desborough's son, Robert, is disporting himself somewhere in your part of Africa, and he won't come home in obedience to his father's cablegrams. We want you to catch him and send him back to us, Archie."

Mr. Smart had no concern either for aimless

The Flying African.

wanderers or anxious parents ; nevertheless, for his cousin's sake, he feigned an interest.

"I suppose you won't be going back for some months ?" queried Mr. Desborough.

"Yes, I return to-morrow night," replied the commissioner.

"But, Archie, your leave is not up for some months !"

"I'm giving that up—at least for the present, Vi. The fact is," he explained, becoming suddenly animated, "I've got a job in hand I'm rather keen on. Yesterday morning I received a cable from Cameron of the Presbyterian Mission, sent over a hundred miles by runners to the nearest station, to say that he had heard that Msoro has pegged out. Now this old chap held the biggest stock of ivory that I have ever heard of one chief holding, but the obstinate old devil would never sell. He was reported to be superstitious, but I set him down as nothing more or less than a black-skinned miser. I know, though, that his son has no fancy notions on this score, and that he will be glad to sell ; and I want to buy for the British Government.

"And where does your miser in ivory live?" inquired Mr. Desborough.

"About a hundred and fifty miles west of Cameron's mission. Quite in the wilderness."

"But why not let your deputy act for you?" suggested Mrs. Mauprey.

The Ivory Raiders.

"He has got his arms full of native trouble north of the Lake. Apart from that, you at home here have little idea of the mischief latent in a tusk of ivory. People don't seem to consider that the ordinary laws of morality hold good in its case. They put ivory-raiding on the level of poaching—it's all right if you aren't caught. Well, every poacher that hears of Msoro's death will make a grab at his tusks—and the head game-keeper is away. I know a rascally Arab who won't be long idle, and there are others besides. Fortunately, as far as natives are concerned, the harvest, which is coming on, is likely to hold them a bit, but I shall be lucky if I get there in time."

"I am not so foolish," remarked Mr. Desborough, "as to imagine that you are likely to tumble across my son just because you are going out to the Zambesi, though there is always the tenth chance. It is very important that he should return home as soon as possible. I am sure you will help me, should the opportunity occur."

"Unfortunately, I am not going near the Zambesi, Mr. Desborough, but you can rely on me if your son comes anywhere near me. The fact is, I want to carry out this little mission as secretly as possible. The news of my return might precipitate the action of others. So I have decided to cut across from Mozambique overland to the Lake, and

The Flying African.

cross in a dhow to Cameron's Mission. He will have a caravan ready for me, and we shall go on together. I don't propose to touch a settlement, if I can help it, and I ought to save a week on the river route."

"You go by the east coast, then?"

"Yes, overland to Brindisi, and P. and O. to Aden, where I should pick up the German boat. I shall cable to Mozambique to an old Banyan trader I know to have carriers and provisions ready, and I hope not to be delayed a day."

"You are qualifying to be known as the Flying African, Archie," said Mrs. Mauprey.

"Oh! I am going for the record this time. But I must be off, Vi. I'll——"

"One minute. I want you to understand the importance of this request of ours. Mr. Robert Desborough is somewhere on the Zambesi, getting experience——"

"Is he?" snapped the commissioner. "The sooner people realise that Africa is not a kindergarten for——"

"Don't get vicious. Well, the chance has now turned up for him to go into Parliament, and become a private secretary to Lord Luton. You know him?"

"For my sins, I do."

"Lord Luton has the chance of pushing young men forward," said Violet Mauprey severely.

The Ivory Raiders.

"And you want me to pack Robert Desborough home again? Lord, I'll do it joyfully, if I'm able! I speak plainly, Mr. Desborough, but you can hardly guess the trouble these young free-lances make for us sometimes."

"Perhaps," insinuated Mrs. Mauprey sarcastically, "as Msoro's ivory is so magnetic, you may find Bob raiding it."

"God help him if I do! I must be off now, Vi. I will see you at lunch to-morrow. Good night, sir. Your son shall be returned to Parliament, if I can do anything."

A moment later he was threading his way down the room towards his hostess.

"Archie does take his work so seriously," said Mrs. Mauprey, "and I am afraid he does not respect politicians. But now let us talk about your election address."

"I like that man," replied Mr. Desborough. "But I would sooner work with him than against him."

CHAPTER VIII.

STRONG MEASURES.

WHOSOEVER wishes to adopt buccaneering as a serious occupation cannot do better than make acquaintance with the Masungus of Central Zambesia, provided he intend to conduct his business on such conservative lines as attacking from the rear, waiting in ambush, and disdaining to engage superior forces.

The Masungus (white men) have little right to their name, for in complexion they range from the colour of bran to plug tobacco, and the darkest is as fine a fellow as the palest. No matter how heavily diluted the strain of European blood may be, he is still a welcome member of the fraternity. The true native defers to him, because of this trace of a dominant people, and loathes him for his domineering instincts. The Portuguese laugh at his pretensions, but acknowledge them; for they find the Masungu a very useful man at his work. Of such was the escort Max promised to the trio, and early on the morning after signing the agreement, his *capitao* went swiftly along the banks of the river, delivering to sleepy-eyed men who still

The Ivory Raiders.

shivered under their meagre blankets, messages which roused in them a glow of satisfaction.

Kip had doubted whether Max could provide an adequate outfit in time to start on the Wednesday; and certainly travellers who have been detained for days in these frontier towns in order to obtain a few commonplace requirements, would have rubbed their eyes at the celerity with which this not formidable expedition was equipped. No one had an interest in delaying them. No supercilious cigarette-smoking, finger-stained official troubled them for gun-licences, road-dues, or made other exactions. The equipment came straight from the stores of their host and the Jew; the carriers were impressed from the *prazos* and plantations of the same worthies; and the Commandant turned his accommodating eye in an opposite direction when the ammunition was packed in harmless-looking cases.

The people of Orobo were informed that the expedition was being sent to hunt elephant, and believed not a word of it. There was not sufficient profit in ivory hunting to tempt such cormorants as Max and Raphael to the risk; but when an obvious lie is told, it is often convenient to appear credulous, so the story passed unchallenged.

Max kept his guests busy, from the moment he woke them with dismally aching heads on the morning following the treaty, until they were ready to

Strong Measures.

depart. He had them under surveillance the whole time, giving no chance for gossip. They were induced to overhaul every stitch and rope of their camping-gear—though, indeed, they were too good travellers to need any urging on this matter—to tabulate their stores, weigh the bales so that no load exceeded fifty pounds, and to arrange everything in a ship-shape manner.

The provisions and trading-goods, with which they were to pay their way on the march up-country, were dealt them with an open hand. It was no part of Max's policy to stint them, or to give them any cause for dissatisfaction. They packed a small supply of liquors for emergency. It was the custom of Anderson and Kip to abstain from intoxicants from the moment of starting on a trip until they reached a settlement, when they made up handsomely for lost time.

The carriers came in on the Tuesday night and slept beside their loads. Next morning they crossed the river, leaving it to the white men to follow at their leisure. Raphael had disappeared—to make arrangements with the Arabs, his partner said; so Max and his guests were left alone. Since the night of signing the agreement there had been some mistrust and a forced cordiality between them. The Dutchman was never quite at ease in their presence; while they felt there was something they did not fathom in their host's demeanour.

The Ivory Raiders.

However, they discussed plans and probabilities with much hopefulness as they ate their last meal, and then set out.

Max crossed the river and accompanied them a few miles, as a final precaution against their gossiping with strangers, then wishing them "*Boa viagem*" effusively, he returned to Orobo. As his tall powerful figure swung out of sight round a bend in the path, Kip waved his hand.

"'Strewth! I'm glad to be quit of 'im. He seemed to be watchin' me the 'ole time as though 'e thought I'd sneak the spoons."

"Yes," said Bob; "I don't suppose we owe Mr. Max much on the score of hospitality. Anyhow, it does not weigh on my mind."

They had arranged a short march to an outlying village for that day, where the carriers were to await them. Their guide was Juão, the interpreter, a bright-eyed intelligent youth, who was none too sorry to get away from his master's ken for a spell.

As they were marching blithely ahead, a figure, strangely similar to Juão, emerged from the bushes and planted himself, grinning, in front of Anderson. He carried a bundle such as natives use when going a journey.

Anderson stared with amazement—then ejaculated: "Why, sugared if it ain't Jim!" Turning to the others he explained:

Strong Measures.

"Jim was once my boy down in the South. I knew he was a Zambesi nigger, but never reckoned to come across him up here." Looking rather nervously at the others, he held out his hand.

"Shake, Jim."

Kip and Desborough looked away. They quite appreciated his feelings, nevertheless the familiarity was not to be encouraged.

Speaking as if in apology, Anderson resumed :

"He nursed me through a long go of fever, and once when I was drunk I half corpsed him, but he never ran away. He's the best nigger I ever knew." Then to the boy : "Where you going to, Jim ?"

Bob thought he had never seen such a capacious grin, as the boy replied : "Me come alonga you, boss, me be your boy ; cook and carry gun."

"Good old Jim," said Anderson. "Say, boys, this is luck, he can cook a treat."

As they trudged along Jim gave his recent history. After leaving Anderson in Natal, he had made his way back to a native village close by Orobo, and with his "hard-earned" wages had bought a wife. Then he built himself a hut and watched her cultivate Kaffir corn, *milho*, and tomatoes. Being of a thrifty nature, when the slack season came in the fields he sent her out to work, and latterly she had made three rupees a month by washing for Senhor Raphael. This money Jim stored to buy another helpmate. Moreover he

The Ivory Raiders.

benefited in a second way. Many a night, after Raphael's household was asleep, he smuggled himself into the compound and ate the food which had been stolen for him during the day. When Anderson came to Orobo, Jim had immediately recognised him, but kept to the background because he feared Max more than ghosts or snake-bites. Hearing that the three men were about to set out on an expedition, the boy's roving spirit took the helm. He decided to be of the party. Packing his baggage, which consisted of a wooden rest for a pillow, a pair of old boots (once Anderson's) which he wore whenever he was *not* walking, a calico wrapper for protection at night, and several unnecessary trifles, he bade farewell to his wife, urging her to diligence during his absence, and then, crossing the river, presented himself to the company.

They found the carriers at the village where they were to encamp for the night. Here, also, was an addition to their numbers, a small party of the Masungus—the main body were to join at the end of the next march.

These men had a ruffianly, piratical aspect. The cast-off European clothing which they affected looked ridiculous in combination with the native garments, for no man owned a suit complete. The headgears ranged from old solar topees and home-plaited straws to crimson scarves tied turban-wise. Each man had his weapon, either an old

Strong Measures.

service-rifle, a Martini, or a Snider ; one carried a flint-lock rifle, heavily bound with brass wire.

At a glance it was evident that they had made themselves at home. The owners of the best huts in the village had been ejected, and the Masungus were in possession. The carriers were impressed as servants, to draw water, cut wood, and to roast pilfered chickens and goat's flesh. Awaiting the cooking, these marauders smoked maize-leaf cigarettes and chattered.

As the white men entered the village the Masungus came forward in twos and threes, making bows that were dangerously suave and obsequious, declaring the while in villainous Portuguese that they were the servants of the senhores, that they put their heads under their masters' heels. But their politeness was offensively superficial, and did not disguise the fact that each man intended to be his own master.

When they returned to their fires, Kip surveyed them ruefully.

"Geewhillikins ! what a nice-looking lot ! Sort of Young Men's Christian Association, ain't they ? Well, if we only get our throats cut, we shall be lucky. They look as if they could murder a chap in ten different ways at once."

Bob regarded them with interest.

"They are a new lot to me," he said. "I never took cheek from a nigger yet, and I am not setting

The Ivory Raiders.

much store on their white blood. Let's kick 'em out of these huts and take them ourselves."

"Leave it till to-morrow night," suggested Anderson. "The other crowd will be in then, and we can give the lot a bit of our minds."

The first camp is inevitably irksome. The "boys," new to their work, do not know where to lay hands on stores or utensils. Everything is in confusion. On that night the travellers were content with the accommodation of an inferior hut, hastily cleaned, and a makeshift meal. The carriers took any shelter they could find in the outskirts of the village, and soon—with the exception of the Masungus, who sat up half the night chatting and smoking—all were asleep.

They started early in the morning and marched twenty miles. On the way small parties of Masungus joined the caravan. They looked even more disreputable by day than by night. Each man carried some plunder: poultry, garden-produce or household effects, which he had captured on the road. They showed solicitude only for their rifles; a piece of rag protected the locks from damp, the barrels showed no trace of rust, and care was taken to place them in safe resting-places when they halted. At their approach, the inhabitants of the villages scurried into the bush, laden with their more portable belongings. The Masungus swiftly pounced upon what was left, chasing screeching

Strong Measures.

chickens, "rounding up" goats, and denuding and trampling the gardens most wantonly. After they had pillaged to their satisfaction they attached the booty to the already overloaded carriers. Desborough remonstrated without effect; the culprits barely tried to conceal their derision at his effort. Juão, when consulted, said that the people of Orobo permitted this license on their travels, and that it could not be stopped.

"Can't it? We'll see," snapped Anderson, and he strode along silently during the rest of the day's march.

The half-breeds considered the carriers their property. Not content with loading them with their baggage, as the day grew hotter they made them carry their rifles also. The overladen men appealed to their masters, but the time had not come for interference, and they went away, staggering dejectedly under their loads. Meanwhile the trio constrained their feelings, promising themselves a settlement with the night. Not only were they indignant at seeing the carriers ill-treated by men whom they regarded as being on a level with them, but their own authority was flouted, and that was even harder to bear.

During that day Robert Desborough had been in a mood of despondency. He had purposely abstained from consideration since the signing of the agreement, fearing that he might repent of his bargain.

The Ivory Raiders.

To this end, he had flung himself eagerly into the preparations for the journey. Then came the excitement of the start, and the consequent buoyancy of spirits natural to any young man at such a time. But now his mind had leisure, and it was taking a revenge. He was disturbed to find that the expedition had a side to it more sinister than he had anticipated. The bearing of the Masungus brought this home sharply to him. Already he had reconciled himself to the fact that Max Klein was a rogue, and that Raphael, his partner, was likely to be worse. Now he found that the company that his comrades and himself were called upon to lead were a pack of cut-throats, ripe for the hangman. Somewhat tardily he put to himself the question, "What ought I to do?"

His conscience, or a code of morality acquired ready-made from his preceptors (he was uncertain which), answered him, like a flash: "Give it up. Obey your father's message and return home. This is the highest form of courage." But his whole being resented such a course. To turn his back on his friends, dangers and difficulties, was to name himself a shirker in his own mind for ever. He knew the stubbornness of his companions well enough to be assured that any suggestion of withdrawal at this juncture would expose him to contumely. The very antagonism that they were experiencing from the Masungus had tempered

Strong Measures.

their resolution to a white heat, and he sympathised with them. At this time, as often before, his father's words recurred to him: "I had rather you returned home the hero of a grave mistake than that you should live on, an amiable mediocrity." Truly the sentiment was likely to be put to the test. The inversion of the orthodox point of view in the course he was taking struck him with cynical humour. He had learned of the narrow and thorny path that leads to righteousness, also of the broad and smiling way to perdition. And behind him stretched a fair and open road to honour and distinction, with his father's cablegram shining like a beacon on the horizon; while, in front, the track was steep and stony enough to suit the doubting footsteps of the most persistent of penitents. And it wound, through many perils, to possible ignominy, yet with open eyes he was deciding to take it! The time had passed for turning back. From the ashes of his failures there had gleamed one spark of consolation at which he had often warmed his weakening self-confidence. He had been known as a loyal and cheerful comrade. His mates had always staked their faith in him. And he vowed with a fervour, almost pathetic, that he would keep this reputation warm and glowing until he returned home. Let it cost what it might, he would stand by the others until a haven had been reached.

The Ivory Raiders.

Thus he resolved, and feeling that he had sacrificed at the altar of fidelity, he gathered up his cheerfulness and marched along whistling so serenely that his comrades turned round and regarded him with astonishment. But one matter he was determined upon: that night should bring about an understanding with the Masungus.

Owing to the liberties of these marauders the caravan failed to reach the village where they intended to camp until late in the afternoon. And there they found the remainder of the escort established in the best huts, in which they had stored their booty. They were squatting around the fires, cooking their suppers, while the despoiled villagers watched them gloomily from a distance. The two parties quickly mingled, making as formidable a gang of freebooters as one could wish to avoid. Experiences were exchanged amid much laughter and cigarette smoke, and the leaders had the humiliation of guessing that the richest jests were prompted by their futile interference throughout the day.

The wearied carriers deposited their burdens and commenced to build a light stockade away from the village, to form a shelter from the heavy dews. Some were told off to erect the tent. Jim and the interpreter, João, who were old associates, prepared their masters' supper, whilst the three lay on the ground and smoked. They had decided to take no steps to enforce order until they had eaten.

Strong Measures.

It was a silent meal that followed. The situation was critical, and they did not trouble to make a pretence of indifference. Forty yards away from them, the Masungus raised their din of laughter and repartee, which grew more reckless and abandoned every minute. They, at least, were in high spirits, seeing before them an expedition after their own hearts; an expedition that promised to yield plenty of plunder at but little risk to their bodies. All had agreed not to take the strictures of the white men seriously, but to raid and plunder as they saw fit. They intended to rebel against long and tiring marches, and whenever they came to a pleasant locality they would find a sufficient reason for a protracted halt. All things considered, the pay was good, and with any luck the booty should form a welcome addition. Such matters they decided over their supper.

Outside the villages, where the carriers had made their camp, a feeling of despair prevailed. These men had come forward willingly on learning that the expedition was to be led by Englishmen. They had heard that the British treated their porters well. Yet two days had passed, and the Masungus had been allowed to bully them without a check. Worse, the white men had attempted to interfere, and had been rebuffed. They told each other, in low voices, what a tyranny the unrestrained mastery of the Masungus would

The Ivory Raiders.

mean, as they cooked their rations of crushed millet, and they had not the heart to drone their usual choruses, or even to beg an allowance of salt to flavour their porridge. Some showed marks of the blows that they had received during the day, and wondered if it were not better to return to their homes and face the wrath of the Dutchman.

The meal was finished, and the Masungus were sprawling around their fires in a hundred attitudes. A few were still talking with animation, all were smoking, and there was a spirit of restfulness over their portion of the camp that was mightily undeserved.

Presently Bob rose from the table and said :

"If it is all the same to you, boys, I would like to do the talking. I feel sort of loaded, and want to let myself off."

The others assented, and they went from the tent. There was no need for words—they knew what they had to do. Kip and Anderson took their seats on some boxes by the camp fire, apparently at their ease, yet each had his weapons handy. Desborough leaned against the tent-pole and fingered the revolver in his coat-pocket. Juão was called to interpret, and Jim, guessing what was to happen, came for the sake of protection, as well as to be in the fun. The chance of scoring off the Masungus was too rare to be missed. As

Strong Measures.

a preliminary, Bob instructed Juão with unusual earnestness.

"Look here, boy. . . You've just got to interpret for your life. If you don't speak exactly as I put it, you will be the first to get hurt. Don't alter a word."

Luckily Juão was quickwitted, having served with Englishmen before, and though he did not speak their language easily he was quick to take the meaning of what was said, and had the knack of conveying the speaker's ideas without diminution of effect. Being a true negro, he hated the Masungus single-heartedly, and he resolved that the speech should miss none of its sting in translation; in fact he began to compose a few insults to interpolate on his own account. Then he called the Masungus defiantly. They approached the tent with an air of tolerant curiosity. These white men had been put in authority over them, and it might be entertaining to hear what they wished to say. It would give them the opportunity of showing how lightly they valued any orders.

Bob gave a quiet glance at his companions to assure himself that they were ready. It was sufficient. They sat close behind, indifferent but alert, and there was no sign of fear on their faces. Now that they were actually facing danger the spirits of all were again buoyant.

The Ivory Raiders.

"Take care they don't rush us, you chaps. I'm going to hit 'em where it hurts most."

He began, speaking a sentence at a time, and waiting whilst Juão interpreted. His manner was supercilious, but biting, and he tossed each sentence at the crowd as one throws a bone to a stray dog. He worded his phrases so that Juão should readily understand.

"Here, you niggers. I've sent for you to explain things. You've got a wrong idea of this expedition. You are under our orders. The first man to disobey will be tied up and shot. We allow no thieving from the villages. On the march every man carries his own rifle and belongings, as the porters are our servants, not yours. If we catch one of you putting a burden on a carrier that man will be flogged. You will do as we tell you . . . travel as we wish, and stop when we stop."

The Masungus listened, at first contemptuously, then with rising anger. But Bob went on :

"You have a notion, because some white trash were foul enough to become your forefathers, that you were better than your mothers. You are not. You are neither white nor black : neither horse nor decent ass, and if you cannot behave, we will treat you worse than ever you treated a nigger."

They had squatted in a semi-circle to hear him, but as he finished their anger blazed forth, red-hot, and they sprang to their feet, gesticulating furiously.

Strong Measures.

No man had addressed them so before. One, who spoke some words of English, cried :

“Why dare you speak us same as that? You know us no niggers. We white men, all same you.”

At the comparison Desborough exploded.

“You half-bred cur! You’re no more white than the dogs that eat the filth from your villages.” Picking up a log that had been cut for their camp fire, he flung it, hitting the man on the bare breast.

Jim and Juão both repeated the words in their dialect, even as they had been uttered, with poignant additions of their own.

The effect was instantaneous. Knives flashed in the firelight. The frantic, surging crowd, every man yelling at the top of his voice and lusting for murder, pressed towards the three to annihilate them. But they found themselves confronted by desperadoes more reckless and defiant than themselves.

Bob stood erect, eager but unmoved, with an uplifted revolver. Kip, savage and venomous as a terrier, levelled his gun; whilst Anderson, in the background, seized a huge burning log from the fire which illuminated a look of unholy joy in his face.

“Give me room, boys, for God’s sake give me room,” he shouted. Here at last was something tangible with which they could grapple, and they felt equal to it. Even Jim and Juão, infected with

The Ivory Raiders.

the general spirit of madness, had seized guns and were yelling with the best.

Those in the front ranks wavered. They had left their rifles at the huts and carried only smaller arms. A pistol was fired from the rear, without doing damage; but the man dropped at a shot from Desborough's revolver. Then some ancient Berserker spirit took hold of Anderson. His face blazed. Whirling the log round his head, so that a trail of sparks shot out to the farthest Masungu, he sprang forward, shouting:

"Back to your holes, you rats! Back you go!" They fled, even as he ordered them. Like rats they scampered in a terrible fright to any spot that would give them shelter. These were foes beyond their experience, and they wanted time to consider their actions.

Almost reluctantly the three returned to their tent.

CHAPTER IX.

A MESSAGE FROM QUEER STREET.

A HUNDRED gleaming, malevolent eyes watched the white men into the tent. But their vigilance was balked, as the flap was pulled across the opening, and they saw nothing but the taut fabric, illuminated by the candle-light, with distorted, shifting silhouettes thrown upon the canvas. Jim and Juão mounted guard before the door

Immediately stealthy forms stole from their shelter and made for the largest hut, in which Binzi, the *capitão*, had taken a lodging, but ere a half of them had crawled through the aperture their stricken self-esteem received another shock. Strange sounds issued from the tent. They began with staccato tappings, as of kettledrums, and the whistling of pipes, growing in volume and intensity until there burst forth the strains of a triumphant march ! It was Mr. Robert Desborough, giving for the first time in Central Africa his rendering (once famous in an Oxford college) of the drums and fifes. Then the human voice was added to the din—a bass and a shrill falsetto—and those nearest the door of the hut were scandalised to see the shadow of the

The Ivory Raiders.

smallest of the trio performing the maddest war dance they had ever seen.

The flaunting insolence of the proceedings struck a chill into the hearts of the Masungus. Their opinion of the white men became tinged with superstition. Never before had they met men so certain of their own predominance. They congregated inside the hut, where threats and speeches of violence were spoken in subdued tones. These *gringos* had humiliated their order, and should die during the night, or at latest on the march to-morrow. So concerted the younger men, and for a time no one opposed them. But as their fury subsided in the flow of many words, dissentient voices became audible. The elders of the party gave other counsel. To kill their leaders would mean a return to the Zambesi, because they well knew that without their co-operation they could never bring the expedition to a successful issue. And to go back without having made an attempt to accomplish their task, and withal without their leaders, would mean a dismal reckoning with the all-powerful Dutchman who had employed them, and, what was perhaps worse, a settlement with the Jew, who found out everything, and who revenged himself in strange ways at unexpected moments. They were the two men on the stretch of the Zambesi whom the Masungus feared. Moreover, even though they decided to brave the anger

A Message from Queer Street.

of their employers, there were other reasons against the return to Orobo. Their leaders were Englishmen, and not infrequently a British light-draught gunboat, with white sailor-men and long-range guns, commanded by irrepressible, inquisitive youngsters, came up as far as Orobo and practised firing at targets. Of these men the Masungus were suspicious. On some former trouble the officers had made themselves so obnoxious that they took away with them twice as much as they had any right to demand. The Masungus were true river-people and, assuredly, the Zambesi would be a troublesome home for the murderers of British subjects, once the news crept out.

The elder men argued long and earnestly; they pointed out that they would not only lose their pay, but the loot that they counted on obtaining from Tembe's country. At least, let them wait until they had raided the ivory—then they could state that their leaders had been killed in the fight. The matter was discussed with keenness by both sides well into the night, and as they argued, the sounds of low but jubilant choruses came to them from the carriers' quarters with unpleasant distinctness. Several times a proposal was made to silence the singers, but always the fear of that indomitable trio restrained them.

Outside the tent Jim and Juão rejoiced also as they kept their guard. For them it was a great

The Ivory Raiders.

night. Many an insult and many a blow had been avenged in the past half-hour. They had been the means of degrading their old oppressors, and handsomely had they acquitted themselves. Desborough's language, stinging in itself, had formed but a portion of what had been translated, and they repeated to each other a dozen times the more venomous insults that had been conveyed. The world could now offer them nothing better. Certainly the Zambesi would not be a restful home for the boys when the Englishmen were no longer there to protect them, but they were willing to let that pass. They were young, and the world was large. Moreover, there remained to them a goodly period of service, so the future could very well be left to take care of itself.

Personal servants to Europeans in tropical Africa are beings of importance. The higher position of the master the higher does the servant rank in the eyes of his fellow-countrymen. No one was better aware of this than Jim and Juão. As their masters had just exalted themselves magnificently, they also agreed to become very big men during the rest of the expedition, men to be flattered and propitiated with bribes.

When Bob's performance was ended and Kip had subsided, breathless, on to a box, they discussed their position.

"I feel better than I have felt since I left

A Message from Queer Street.

England," said Desborough. "That was a good five minutes, worth coming all the way for."

"It was a big bluff," remarked David. It came off all right, though. My! didn't they scoot!"

But Kip, after his first access of elation, was cooling down.

"Yes, we scared 'em first-rate; but what now? I guess they are plotting blue murder in their holes. We'll all be clammy corpses in the morning if we don't take care."

"Let 'em talk," growled Anderson. "I don't care. They're done for, knocked flat. I know the breed—they'll curse and snarl like savage dogs, but it won't come to anything. They are on the chain now. They will know their masters, once they've had their lesson. It won't pay them to touch us, and they will see it, once they've had time to think. Keep them to heel, work them regular, and treat them well. That's the handling they require, and they will be like lambs in a few days."

"Like a regular bloomin' Sunday-school class," chuckled Kip. "And we'll teach them kiss-in-the-ring an' give 'em buns. . . . What-O for 'Ampstead 'Eath!"

"You see," continued Anderson, "it won't suit their book to kill us. The danger lay in their rushing us at first; but now they've found we'll go to hell rather than stand nonsense, they will let us

The Ivory Raiders.

alone; and we will treat them fairly. The danger with niggers comes from constant bullying and nagging; that's what breeds mischief and causes half the murders."

They dismissed the Masungus from their minds for the time. There was another matter that troubled them. Kip put it into words as he lit his pipe.

"I say, mates! this job may be all right for what I knows. But how do we stand with that couple at Orobo, eh? I don't trust 'em. I believe they're thinking how they can do us one in the eye, if they haven't already made up their minds."

"I noticed how almighty anxious they were to get us out of the way before the *Crocodile* came along," said Anderson reflectively. "And what a fright the Jew was in about signing that paper—that was queer—and how they wanted to get out of paying us anything in hard cash."

"That perishin' Sheeny would swindle 'is own mother. The Dutchy would do the bloomin' Jew, and they're both meaning to do us," asserted Kip. "We stand a fine chance, don't we? But we've got the agreement, though, and we'll have 'em on that."

Bob smiled.

"Yes, my son, we've got the agreement, bless you; and if they don't pay we can ask the British consul at Chindi to take the matter in hand for us. We should look happy giving evidence how we

A Message from Queer Street.

raided Tembe, shouldn't we? We'll have to play the hand out ourselves, I reckon."

"Well, I'd sooner go to gaol than be swindled by them two dirty scoundrels," said Kip.

"I'd a sight sooner twist their necks for them," said Anderson; "and I will, if they play us double. But the devils will be too tricky to give us the chance. If they don't mean to play fair, you may bet they won't tell us so. They will get at us when we don't expect it. I should not be surprised if they mean stopping their drafts at the bank, or something of that kind, and that's why they didn't want to pay hard cash. I don't know nothing about bills and cheques, except there always seems trouble with 'em. But they will find themselves in the wrong box if they try on any of their games, I tell you."

"It is like this," said Bob slowly, after a pause. "We are practically lost for the time being. Sort of 'Babes in the Wood,' with over a hundred wicked uncles to look after us and two kind god-fathers at Orobo. We are a fairy-tale and boys' story-book rolled into one. If any of our admiring relatives were to think of trying to trace us (which may not occur to them for a year) they would find it mighty difficult to do so after Beira. There, they would probably be informed that we were dead! I don't suppose anyone in Orobo, but Max and Raphael, even knows our names. No; we've got to

The Ivory Raiders.

look after our own hides—that's evident. And it is possible they may take some looking after, when once we've done the dirty work and lifted that ivory."

"Let's go back," said Kip.

But this suggestion was unsatisfactory. They had no money, and two of them had little chance of procuring any, and they were not anxious to return to the privations and indignities that they had recently undergone. Anything, they all agreed, would be better than that. And, as Desborough pointed out, they had no proof that their partners (the word left an evil flavour in their mouths) were going to deal unfairly by them. Both were risking much in the venture, and to abandon the expedition without sufficient cause would be cowardly and contrary to their own interest.

Anderson and Bob threshed out the matter without coming to a conclusion. Kip sat silently engrossed in his thoughts. Presently, with the air of one solving a problem, he produced an ancient pocket-book, from which he extracted a letter.

"Be'old the bond of sin! Lord, no—it's my Katie's letter! Darned if it isn't like the other thing."

Despite their perplexity, his friends laughed. Kip was in love—stranger still, he was beloved. A favourite topic of his companions was, what could

A Message from Queer Street.

have induced the girl to accept him? Kip attributed their remarks to jealousy. And this could well be, for Kate was a girl of whom any man might be proud. She was a barmaid at Pietermaritzburg. Not, be it understood, one of the clamorous, brazen type, but a good-looking, decorous girl. To quote Kip: "She ain't none of your fancy sort, flashy dresses and yellow 'air, but a lady—covert coat and straw hat—and when we have a buggy out on Sundays you'd expect us to turn into Government 'Ouse to tea."

This letter had been received whilst waiting at Beira, and it had proved such a comfort to the little man that, piece by piece, he shared it with his companions. At first he only read extracts; then, as his listeners proved sympathetic, he gave them more, until one night, after a distressing day that had put them all in the dumps, he produced the epistle, and in a burst of generosity read it through, beginning with "Dolf, darling," and ending proudly, "Your soon-to-be wife, Katie." From that moment their chaffing ceased. They considered that he had placed himself on their forbearance, and that it would be ungenerous to take any advantage. Desborough in particular refrained from jocularities.

But now the appearance of the letter in place of the agreement was received with ironical comments. Anderson enquired which of the two would prove

The Ivory Raiders.

the more binding in case of emergency. For once Kip could not be drawn, and he discovered the agreement between a lottery ticket for some Johannesburg races, and an advertisement of Sunday afternoon excursions. Flattening it upon the overturned box which served as a table, he read the contents aloud. His comrades made irreverent remarks at every clause, but Kip took little notice, methodically folding the paper when he had finished. Then he rummaged one of the provision boxes. Article after article was examined and rejected, until he came to a packet of tea enclosed in a cardboard case. This served his purpose. The others watched him curiously as he cut the cardboard into squares the size of the document and produced some string.

"What's he doing?" asked Desborough.

"He is afraid his dandy agreement will get soiled," suggested Anderson, who had no opinion of its value. "Wear it next your heart, Kip, with your sweetheart's lock of hair."

The little man made no retort. He knew the irritating influence of silence on such occasions. Again he turned over the contents of the box till he found a bottle of fruit salts. The blank side of a gorgeous wrapper found him in stationery. Something of his intention came to Desborough. He leant across the box, picked up the agreement, and perused it. Then he threw it back. The document

A Message from Queer Street.

slipped under Kate's letter. A moment later he was again deep in argument with Anderson. Kip was intent on his task. He took the paper nearest him. A match applied to the stopper of the bottle found him in sealing wax, and the packet was neatly sealed and stamped with the initials of the maker on the butt end of a revolver.

"I ain't goin' to wear it next my 'eart, Mr. Clever," said Kip at length. "It's goin' further an' safer than that. An' if you're so thick-'eaded as you can't tell what I'm doin' you'll have to wait and see. Give me a pencil."

Cutting a piece of the wrapper to the size of a sheet of notepaper he wrote:—

"God knows where, something
north of Orobo Grande.

"May, more or less.

"To MR. NED BRADLEY,

"Storekeeper,

"Chindi.

"DEAR NED,—If you don't get word of us three calendar months from date, say July 31st, kindly hand the enclosed letter to the British Consul at Chindi and ask him to act as he thinks proper. But if you receive a message, wire, or letter containing code word () keep it safe until we turn up. Do not mention this to a soul, and for heaven's sake put the letter in a safe place. Please

The Ivory Raiders.

do this for a pal in Queer Street. Hoping to split
a soda with you soon,

“Yours truthfully,

“H. ADOLPHUS SMITH.

“Per favour of

“J. SANDERSON, Esq.,

“Engineer, *Crocodile*.”

The others followed him over his shoulder, and as his plan elucidated itself they grew enthusiastic.

“Good old Kip!” shouted Bob, slapping him fervently on the back. “Blest if you oughtn’t to have been a diplomatist. But how are we to get the letter down to Chindi?”

“I’ll take it to Orobo myself if there’s no one else to go,” said Kip. “Johnny Sanderson, of the *Crocodile*, will carry it to Ned if we can only get it there in time. The *Croc.*’s due in to-morrow, but it ain’t no good trusting it to one of these mouldy half-castes. They’d take it straight to the Dutchy. I know ’em!”

“Jim’ll take it,” said David Anderson, “and deliver it so as no one hears of it. Max don’t know he’s with us, even if he sees him—that’s a score. He’ll travel right back to the river in one night.”

“A quart of beer for Jim! If we can get it there I can trust Johnny—knew both ’im and Ned in the old colony: they come up here together. He’ll take it down to Chindi, and Ned Bradley will keep

A. Message from Queer Street.

it safe as 'ouses and do as I tell 'im till it's wanted. He's all right. But say, what code-word shall we use ? ”

Desborough glanced at the other paper on the box. The candle was low and guttering. He flicked a piece of wick from out of the grease.

“ Say ‘ Katie,’ ” he said ; “ she'll bring us luck.”

Kip looked pleased, and her name was inscribed in the blank space. The note and the sealed packet were made up into one, and addressed to “ Mr. Ned Bradley, Chindi, per S.S. *Crocodile*.” A second note was written to the engineer, asking him to deliver the parcel, and under no circumstances to mention the fact to a soul.

“ I'll ask 'im to write a line to say he's received it safely,” said Kip. “ You can never be sure of them niggers. 'E may go out and sleep in the forest until it's time to come back, destroy the papers and say he's delivered them, and all the time expect a bloomin' great reward.”

“ You can bet on Jim,” said Anderson stiffly. Nevertheless, Kip added the words, and tied up the letters.

Jim, who was still on guard outside the tent, was called. He stated, with satisfaction, that all was quiet, and that the Masungus seemed to have learned a lesson.

On learning his errand he claimed acquaintance-ship with the engineer of the *Crocodile*, but as it

The Ivory Raiders.

was essential that no hesitation or mistake should be made in the delivery of the packet, Kip questioned him pertinently. It then appeared that, two years previously, Jim had landed at Chindi, after a stowaway passage in a sea-going vessel, with the intention of making his way to Orobo without fatigue or undue expense. The *Crocodile* was lying at the quay ready to start on her journey up-stream, manned by a crew of six negro fo'castle hands, and bossed by a white captain and engineer. As the officers were having a farewell chat with the hotel-keeper, the boy straightway assailed the integrity of the native bos'un with a rupee. The addition of fifty cents and an empty tobacco-tin overcame his scruples, and it was arranged that Jim was to travel in the hold behind the bales, only coming out at night when the steamer was moored alongside the bank and the white men were asleep.

For some days the arrangement answered well, until the engineer, in an unprecedented fit of industry, overhauled the cargo, when Jim was brought forth by his hair, struggling and blinking like a fish taken from the water.

Without troubling himself as to details, the engineer caused the bos'un to thrash the intruder, then demanded if there was any reason why he should not be pitched overboard. With admirable presence of mind Jim asserted that he was an unrivalled cook, and spoke English more fluently than

A Message from Queer Street.

any nigger in the country. Fortune favoured the impudent, for it happened that the established cook had just exhausted the patience of his masters by stealing their liquors, and by an extraordinary ability in making every dish taste alike, whether tinned rations or plum-pudding. Jim with some misgiving was given a trial, and quickly won commendation. Henceforth during the trip, he had been in clover, for the cook that cannot feed himself better than his master is lacking in sagacity, and the boy was a Solomon in this regard. On reaching Orobo, with placid assurance he had demanded wages for his service, a demand that drew from the engineer a masterpiece in surprised profanity, which, however, fell to speechlessness when he learned that the new cook refused to accompany the boat on the return trip. But Mr. Sanderson proved himself to be possessed of a judicial mind, for he rewarded Jim with discrimination—two rupees on account of his good cooking, and a thrashing for his impertinence. Both were taken philosophically, and when the pain wore away the ex-cook professed that he desired no fairer master.

After listening to his story, delivered in his halting English, Kip declared that there could be no doubt as to Jim's acquaintance with the true Mr. Sanderson. They ascertained also that the *Crocodile* usually left Orobo at daybreak, to get

The Ivory Raiders.

through a certain gorge before night. This suited their plans, since it would give the messenger a favourable opportunity to deliver the letter before any of the inhabitants were astir, and no one, beyond the senders, need be aware of the communication. After some consultation Jim was given his final instructions. He was to slip out of the camp unobserved about midnight, and travel with all speed to the Zambesi. Arrived there, he was to wait about the banks, hiding in the mealie gardens, until he saw the *Crocodile* was ready to start, deliver his packet, and follow up the caravan.

Jim received his orders cheerfully, hid the letter in his calico garments, and went to take an additional meal and some rest before setting out on his journey.

"That's a dam good nigger," said Kip. "Not many of 'em would travel through the night alone." Then his eye fell upon the paper lying on the table. He picked it up and was about to open it, but the candle flickered and expired, so he changed his mind. Suddenly he made a resolution.

"I won't read this 'ere letter again until we've collared the swag and got it safe, so 'elp me Gawd—or died in the attempt," he added cheerfully. "This is goin' to be our mascot."

A weight was lifted from the minds of the three. They became as merry as they had previously been despondent, and laughed and joked so that their

A Message from Queer Street.

voices rang across the camp, making the Masungus, who were still discussing the events of the evening, curse their hardihood. And Kip, when they had turned in and the others were nearly asleep, broke into unsuppressed laughter. "Oh, Lord! won't our schemin' partners down in Orobo be surprised if they kill us and think they've arranged everything comfortable, to find Smart comes straight out from England and hunts 'em all over the bloomin' shop? We're goin' to be like them wasps what die and leave their stings be'ind 'em. Pity we won't be there to 'elp."

Two hours later, after a nap, Jim looked cautiously around—then, folding the calico that he used for a blanket about his waist, strolled aimlessly into the bush. Once out of sight of the camp he cut across in the direction of the path. Enjoining his ancestors to protect him from lions and ghosts—especially ghosts—he fixed his mind on the big reward that would surely await him on his return, and settled down steadily to a jog-trot that would bring him to Orobo by daybreak.

When they awoke the next morning and found that Jim had gone, the Masungus told each other that the servant of the big senhor had run away during the night, afraid of the violence of his master. But the carriers, though they could not understand it, thought differently.

CHAPTER X.

INTRUDERS.

As Anderson had predicted, the night passed quietly. At sunrise, as though nothing unusual had happened, the camp was astir in preparation for the day's march; but when the three had finished a hasty breakfast, and the boys were packing the iron cups and plates, a deputation from the Masungus came forward with the *capitão* Binzi as spokesman. Binzi did not appear to enjoy this privilege. Kip suggested that it would be inexpedient to receive them, but as their manner was conciliatory, they decided to give them a hearing. Anderson put the matter in a nutshell. "Let the critters talk," he said, "then they won't want to fight." So Binzi opened the negotiations.

He gave a gracious salutation to indicate that the mission was a friendly one, and the rest of the deputation, removing their hats, squatted in a semi-circle upon the ground. Their bearing contrasted favourably with that of the previous night, for the counsel of the elder men had prevailed, and they were now come to make their peace. The *capitão*, with the aid of Juão, apologised for the outbreak

Intruders.

that had occurred, adding that if the senhores ordered them not to forage along the route, the senhores should be obeyed. It was, in his poor estimation, a pity to pay for chicken and goats, when they could be obtained merely by a little exercise. However—and he shrugged his shoulders—the senhores were masters and they were simply servants, whose duty it was to obey. But what his comrades felt most keenly was, that though they realised that they were the inferiors of the senhores Ingles, yet they were not common Kaffirs. With a proud sweep of his hand he continued :

“ We all have white blood in our veins ! Perhaps our faces are not wholly white, like your worships’, yet our hearts are white, even the same as your excellencies’. We have privileges, and for the sake of preserving discipline with the carriers it would be advisable that the senhores should recognise the distinction.”

The Englishmen preserved their gravity with difficulty. The sheep’s clothing sat so easily on the wolf’s back !

“ Yes, senhores,” he continued, “ last night our feelings overcame us at your words. Your excellencies, perhaps, were justly angered, but with the morning comes wisdom, and all that we wish is to travel in harmony together. We only ask that we shall not be treated as the common Kaffirs, who are but slaves—beasts of burden.” With a

The Ivory Raiders.

final bow even more deprecating than the first, he concluded : " My comrades wish me to state that it is their pride to serve under such valiant captains as the senhores have shown themselves."

When this rigmarole had been translated, Bob told Juão to reply that the orders they had given must be obeyed undeviatingly. If this were done, the Masungus would be treated with consideration. Goats, chickens, and other food would be bought for them at the villages, and every man was to share alike. If they disobeyed, then swift punishment would be dealt out to the offenders. On hearing this, the deputation withdrew, and ten minutes later the caravan was on the march.

The behaviour of the Masungus showed a remarkable improvement; still, they had not entirely learnt their lesson. Their predatory instincts, inherited from many generations, were not to be eradicated by a few words. One of them, thinking himself unobserved, captured a hen that was scratching in the dust near a native village. He was tying the legs with a shred of bark when Desborough came up.

" Drop it !" he shouted.

The man hesitated. A revolver gleamed from its case ; the man abandoned the fowl and ran terrified along the path.

Shortly after, Anderson came upon two Masungus who were beating a carrier. They had attempted

Intruders.

to make him carry their rifles, and he had threatened to inform. David's long, powerful arms grasped the two men's necks and banged their heads together until their teeth rattled. When he released them, they fled into the bush, and took care to keep out of sight during the rest of the day, only coming into camp after dark.

Kip hovered about the rear, driving up the laggards. He was like a terrier barking at the heels of a herd of cattle.

Many resented this treatment, and some of the younger men who had suffered chastisement tried to stir up a rebellion, but they failed. Their misfortunes gained them ridicule rather than sympathy. Nor were the Masungus the only ones who required schooling. Kip early discovered that the prompt manner with which they had championed the cause of the carriers made these men quick to take liberties, so, noting the two worst offenders, he had them flogged on their arrival at camp as an object lesson for the others. This impartiality had a stimulating effect upon everyone; they were dominated by the inflexible triumvirate, and no more orderly company had marched through Africa for many a day.

They had left behind the country of the river-folk who profess a tepid allegiance to the Portuguese, and were travelling in a little-known land. The caravan made its way along paths no wider than a

The Ivory Raiders.

man's body, like an attenuated centipede. The reptile slept where it halted, rising at daybreak to feed and continue a march that lengthened almost imperceptibly in those giant distances. The dew-laden undergrowth drenched its flanks, the mid-day sun scorched its back. In the lowlands, the tall grass submerged it bodily for a mile at a stretch, scattering needle-pointed seeds which viciously burrowed their way to the skin. On the high-lands it suffered from a scarcity of water. Towards noon this long, crawling thing halted to eat and rest, creeping a little space farther into the continent before coiling up for the night.

Wild-eyed villagers forsook their homes and fled into the bush, watching it from afar. Sometimes the bolder ones were coaxed to come forward and trade. Then the caravan halted for a day while the women pounded the indian-corn and millet into flour. Perchance, if these black hinds were sufficiently reassured, there was grotesque dancing in night to the beating of tom-toms; but next morning, before the sun drove the mists from the plantations, the thing reassumed its length and crawled away into the forest.

At first, villages were plentiful, with fields of millet higher than a man, stretching from one to another, and the way was shaded by the long quivering foliage. Homely little verbena plants stared with bright eyes at the caravan as it rustled

Intruders.

by, replete with the good things of the district. Then it threaded its way along a valley, into a ravine where it tediously surmounted the loose stones and bruised its legs against the boulders; up to the watershed, grunting and sweating at every step; across a parched and withered table-land from whence the country unfolded northwards in a series of blue mountains and broad, hazy valleys; and down, after a parched, wearisome march, to the low country and an irksome struggle with the long grass.

"Fleas ain't nothing to it," grumbled Kip one evening, as he sat plucking at the seeds that had worked into his shirt. "I'll smile at 'em if ever I get 'ome again. I'd as soon sleep with a litter of 'edge'ogs."

They had halted for the night by a water-hole in fairly open country. The Masungus were busy building the light stockade with which it was their practice to surround the camp. Several of the carriers had come in, but the majority had been delayed unaccountably.

Anderson chuckled. "Leave them alone, Kip. Your skin will get used to them in time. It's much easier. And the grass will be dry soon, so as the natives can burn it. That's the time for soap and water. They won't be able to tell you from a nigger for the first week. My, it's pretty, though, after the first rains, when the flowers and young grass begin to grow!"

The Ivory Raiders.

Bob was patching a rent in his breeches. "It is the rottenest bit of country I've ever struck," he remarked, eyeing his work with profound dissatisfaction. "At least it is at this time of the year. I wonder we aren't all down with fever. Drenched as you go through the wet bush in the morning, baked later on, and half frozen at night, with only scratchy blankets to get into. Lucky we're fairly tough. But it would do a power of good to some men I know. Lord, how I wish I could pick out half a dozen!"

"It isn't a bad country to look at," said Anderson, gazing dreamily at the hill-side. "Look at those bamboos with their leaves a-shimmering and trembling all green and silver-like. Somehow they always make me think of cemeteries."

"Time you was in one, if you get talkin' like that," retorted Kip. "No, sir; bamboos is poison on the march. The chap in front lets them slam back in your face till it feels like grilled steak. . . . Love-a-duck! what's this?"

The bearers were coming back into camp, singing ecstatically. They presented a wild spectacle. Foremost came two men, each wearing, like a mantle, the blood-stained pelt of an animal hastily and clumsily skinned. Every man carried meat: haunches suspended from poles; ribs and shoulders attached to the loads, from which the blood dripped on to perspiring bodies and shambling

Intruders.

legs. One man staggered along with a couple of flayed heads, equine in shape, balancing each other from a sapling. It was a sight to convert the carnivorous to vegetarianism. No load was now too heavy to be coped with. As they came into camp they dumped their loads and the meat indiscriminately, formed a circle and danced, singing and clapping their hands to the beat of the music like so many children.

Juão, who had bounded forward to inspect the spoils, now came back with an explanation. Some of the Masungus had sighted a herd of zebra, which they had patiently stalked to within a few yards. A volley had wounded two, which they subsequently despatched. These men despised such flesh, but the carriers were on the spot before the vultures, and a gory work of dismemberment ensued.

"Nice thing we're in for," growled Kip. "No sleep for us to-night. It's going to be a fair old gorge, with a concert goin' on the whole bloomin' time. To-morrow they will all be ill, and there'll be a run on the medicine chest. Bah! It's sickenin'."

"Hadn't we better tell them to make a camp farther off?" suggested Desborough.

"Better not, mate," replied Anderson. "They'll behave steadier under our eyes. There are some things on a march a man has to put up with."

The Ivory Raiders.

These chaps have been kept pretty tight so far. Let's give 'em a spell. Poor devils, they'll talk of this for months to come."

"Well, I warn you both it's goin' to be a fair orgie," grumbled Kip. "The meat will stink some-thin' 'orrid before morning."

"Give him some cotton wool to put in his ears," said Bob softly. "And tuck him up comfy on the windward side. I'm going to see if the skins are any good."

The sunset faded through the tree-tops and night crept into the underwood, rising higher and higher until it obliterated the topmost branches. Only one space resisted the invasion. Within the stockade the light from a score of fires threw a gay defiance at the encompassing darkness. Every fire had its circle of devotees, men who hungered only for roasting meat. A pungent savour permeated the surrounding bush. Few of these gourmands intended to sleep. On this one unforgettable occasion there was food beyond dreams of greediness. What mattered it if loads must be carried on the morrow? What mattered sickness, or even death? To-night they would cook and eat, and cook again. The Masungus, scornful at first, had also become infected by the craving, and their fires were encompassed by strips of flesh on pointed sticks. Coiled around the glowing embers in a diversity of attitudes they watched them sizzling. The light flickered upon

Intruders.

gleaming eyes and ready teeth, bronze-like limbs escaping from calico robes, and men naked save for trivial goat-skin moochas. The hubbub of a camp disturbed the stillness. Now and again some bard, putting the doings of the day into verse, sang to an ancient tune, and everyone joined in the droning refrain. A rival would endeavour to cap him amid general laughter; then more cooking, more eating and more singing.

The bush without, dark, gloomy and mysterious, formed another world, with its own concerns and deities, good and evil.

Anderson, Desborough, and Kip smoked in front of their tent. At the back Juão ate his supper. He also was well content, for he had cooked his masters twice as much food as they needed, and the remainder was fast disappearing. Yet it was he who struck the discordant note which vibrated to the limits of the stockade.

Pausing with spoon to his lips, he listened, then sprang to his feet.

“‘Mkango! Lion!’” he shouted excitedly.

“Gad! But we ought to have known it,” cried Anderson. Kip turned white and ran for his rifle. Desborough glanced anxiously round the camp.

“Not enough firewood to keep one decent blaze all night, let alone more. Lord, what fools we are!”

Low, muttering growls were now heard approaching. They seemed to come from all sides, as though

The Ivory Raiders.

the stockade were surrounded by lions ravenous for the meat. Men with starting eyeballs stared over their shoulders. Now the growling broke into a shattering roar which seemed to issue from the centre of the camp, and the roar was answered by another, farther away.

The carriers and Masungus indiscriminately huddled close to the brightest fires, and cast wood upon the flames at a rate that would swiftly exhaust the supply.

"There's twenty of 'em," whispered Kip fearfully. "Why couldn't they have left these brutes alone to-day? For Gawd's sake chuck the meat out to 'em."

"There's only two," said Anderson quietly, "and they aren't close up yet. They won't jump the stockade unless they're starving, if we keep the fires going. Juão, boy, make 'em stop all that waste of firewood. Light four fires in a square and put all the others out."

Juão went to obey orders.

"'Course they're starvin'," wailed Kip. "They're lickin' their chops be'ind the fence thinkin' which one they're goin' to 'ave, and it will be me, 'cause I'm easy carried off." He raised his rifle to fire at an imaginary lion, but Bob gripped his arm.

"Stop it, you fool! Even if you could hit them, a wounded lion's worse than a hungry one."

Intruders.

A roar, nearer, louder and fiercer than before, came from outside. Desborough swore, and David seized a burning brand and flung it in the direction of the noise. It described an arc of crimson fire, scattering thousands of sparks in its flight, and fell with a thud far beyond the fence. A furious snarl and a snapping of massive jaws was the response, but a moment later, where the brand had fallen, a blaze from a withered bush illuminated the jungle, and a leaping form crashed into the forest.

"They mean business," said Anderson. "They must be famishing, Bob; lend a hand to chuck out this meat."

Even as he spoke a roar came from the other side of the stockade, a mighty shadow broke from the darkness, curved over the fence, and settled on to the largest piece of the flesh.

For a moment a mangy-looking lion, blinking at the firelight, angrily lashed its tail as though to assert its right of entry; then, with a snarl, it seized the flesh, worried it sideways to shake out any existing vitality, and without show of haste leapt away with its plunder and rejoined its mate.

The men within the firelight had crouched motionless, as though petrified into a group of statuary; but as the lions tore away, Desborough and Anderson sprang to their feet and ran towards the remainder of the meat.

The Ivory Raiders.

"Quick, boys ; out with it !" Huge lumps were quickly flung as far as possible outside the stockade, and in three minutes they regarded their position with more equanimity.

For awhile the camp waited silently, listening to the sounds outside. Away in the distance they could hear the beasts feeding. They could even hear a heavy, grizzling purring, broken by a growl or snarl. Once a fearsome yell smote their ears, as if some waiting beast of inferior degree had ventured too close to their majesties.

Then there was silence, broken at last by stealthy approaching footsteps, which made the fallen leaves and twigs crackle. The men nervously threw more fuel on the fire.

Again a low growl, but this time one of contentment: the beasts had drawn on the meat placed outside the stockade; a sound of sniffing and heavy breathing, and the footfalls receded, while a playful snarl was heard, and it took but little imagination to picture the lioness playfully using her teeth on the Jove-like shoulders of her mate. . . . More sounds of mastication. . . . A bone was crunched with a purr of delight, accompanied by the steady guzzling of solid flesh ; after, a longer period of silence. Yet a third time the footsteps approached the camp, but now there was a marked difference: it was the after-dinner stroll of a gourmet. There was a snuffing at the places where the meat had been.

Intruders.

The men within were still apprehensive, but the terror had faded from their countenances. The invaders had fed. In the distance the snapping of bones by smaller jaws could be heard, and one of the big brutes roared ; but it was only the echo of a former effort. The footsteps receded, and all breathed freely.

Anderson rose and unrolled his blankets. Bob did the same.

“Wot! You ain’t goin’ to sleep?” asked Kip querulously.

Anderson nodded. “Why not? I’m one of two hundred beings in this corral, and the chance is good enough for me. I’ve slept peaceful on shorter odds.”

Desborough laughed. “You’ve done the same a hundred times without knowing it, Kip.”

But the little man shook his head pathetically. “I can’t, with those brutes about.”

The Masungus and carriers, gaining confidence from their leaders, piled up the fires, and stretched themselves on the ground. Their appetites had fled into the bush, as had Kip’s desire for sleep. Taking his rifle, a Lee-Metford, he examined the magazine and put a fresh cartridge in the breech ; then, arranging some boxes into the form of an arm-chair, he commenced his vigil.

During the night, owing to the cold, the carriers awoke at intervals, and saw in the half light the

The Ivory Raiders.

sombre, watchful figure sitting bolt-upright, with eyes trying to pierce the obscurity of the forest. They replenished the fires and fell asleep, marveling that this truculent being who had braved the Masungus so manfully should lose his rest through fear of two gorged brutes. Once for a few minutes Kip dozed, but woke in a panic from a wild dream, and sat up stiffer than ever.

At daybreak he was conscious that Desborough was smiling at him from the comfort of his blankets; Anderson was invited to enjoy the spectacle. Their amusement made Kip feel waspish.

"All very well to laugh," he said, "leaving me to protect the whole camp while you snored like pigs."

Bob rose, approached him curiously, and took the rifle from his stiffened fingers.

"Take care, Bob; it's cocked."

The other nodded, and extracted the cartridge.

"Solid bullet," he remarked to Anderson.

David grinned. "It would take a better shot than you, my son, to kill a lion with a solid bullet. It would go through him as easy as through a gorse-bush, and do about as much harm. Better have a good sleep, Kip. Leave these brutes to Bob and myself."

Without more words they picked up their rifles. The grey light was hardening, the gloomy spaces of the forest came into view, and the spiders' webs

Intruders.

stood out tautly like white rigging. João scouted cautiously ahead. The dark, lithe form of a jackal stole away from the spot where the beasts had held their feast, and heavy footprints showed whither the lions had retired. They followed them half a mile ; then the boy pointed at two shapeless objects. The hunters approached until the limbs of the brutes could be clearly defined.

“ Are you ready, Bob ? ”

“ Right oh ! ”

Four shots in quick succession announced the death of the disturbers, while a cheer arose like a cock-crow from the distant camp.

CHAPTER XI.

NEARING THE GOAL.

AT noon that day Jim caught them up. He had a letter stuck in the cleft of a stick which he carried proudly: it had served him as a talisman against interference on the road. Truly Anderson was rejoiced to see the boy. For several days the conviction had been growing that Jim was a deserter, but his master had stood loyally by him in the face of the many taunts from Kip and the misgivings of Desborough. Kip now took the note, which he read with gratification.

"Croc. Saturday morning.

"DEAR KIP,—Right O! I'll do what you ask, but what in blazes are you doing up there, and what is your little game? Thought you were prospecting down south. We're just off, and I have got a chronic head. Dined ashore with the agents last night—gin, sherry, beer; beer, sherry, gin. Oh, my head! Look me up at Chindi when you come down. Try the cemetery first.

"Yours,

"JOHN SANDERSON."

Nearing the Goal.

"That's all right, as far as it goes," commented Kip. "I'll put it away in my pocket-book along of Katie's letter. Gawd! 'ow I wish I 'adn't swore not to read it!"

He looked wistfully at the others, as though hoping they would suggest an indulgence. Mainly in jest, but with a grain of earnest, it had become an article of faith that the success of the expedition was involved in the little man's vow, and since the night he had made it he had refrained even from fingering the envelope. This letter was facetiously referred to as "The Luck."

"The agent for these steamers happens to be Max," remarked Bob, ignoring Kip's remark. "And you once informed him that you knew Sanderson. Yet Max does not seem to have mentioned your presence in this part of the country. It seems rather strange, doesn't it?"

"What kept you so long, Jim?" inquired Anderson, who felt responsible for his messenger's delay.

The boy seemed nervous at the question. "Me come plenty fast, senhor, but me wait one, two day—*Crocodile* no come. Den, after he come, me give letter, very quiet, sun down dere"—he indicated a point below the horizon—"so as nobody see. Den come along quick, only get bad foot." In support he displayed an old sore which appeared unlikely to have caused any great hindrance.

The Ivory Raiders.

"Oh, you bet he went 'ome to his wife," said Kip scornfully; "or stopped loafin' with the niggers on the road." Then turning to the boy—"No one see you give that letter, Jim, and no one know you come long with us, eh?"

"No, senhor," replied the boy complacently. "But Senhor Sanderson him give me two licks 'cause I no go back with him for cookie, an' half rupee 'cause I bring him letter. Den me leave Orobo soon as daylight."

"Well, go and feed, Jim. I've seen worse niggers, though there's many better," said his master. And much relieved at his dismissal, Jim joined Juão and ate prodigiously.

The caravan advanced along flat, open valleys into a more mountainous country. High up on the shoulders of the hills, looking no bigger than eagles' nests, small villages were perched. Anxious eyes watched its progress from the heights, wondering if this reptile, with its strange white antennæ and stinging tail of scores of rifles, sought man for its prey. To the west, not a hundred miles distant, there was a warlike tribe, who sharpened their spears after the harvest was cut, and devastated the neighbouring peoples. These hill-folk were inured to such invasions; they regarded them as inevitable as the wrath of God—and evaded them to the best of their power. Sorry times were in store if a new scourge were to come from the south! But, to

Nearing the Goal.

their relief, the intruders paid not the least notice to their lofty citadels, and passed out of sight along the valleys.

At last one afternoon Binzi led them along a steep path worn in the hill-side. Yet, sharply though the ground stood, the cultivation was better than they had seen for some time, and a goodly crop of millet was ripening in the slanting sunshine. For an hour they patiently stumbled upwards. The main path followed the valley beneath, a narrow grey ribbon hardly traceable among the vegetation. Whilst wondering where they could be going they issued, to their surprise, on to a floor of level ground, spacious as a cricket-field. The bald, granite head of the mountain shot up a thousand feet above them. In its shelter nestled a group of huts looking like conical, well-trimmed haystacks, and past them, amid a little grove of trees, rippled a stream which stole from the high-land at the back of the peak. Ferns embroidered its banks, while in the crevices of the sun-exposed rocks the cactus flowers blossomed gaily.

The head-man came forward and welcomed them with deference. Max had stayed here on his last expedition, and, realising its importance to his scheme, he had treated the people generously. Binzi explained that it was the last inhabited spot they would see until they came to Tembe's kraals.

He took them to the edge of the slope. Opposite

The Ivory Raiders.

was a range of mountains, with fantastic outlines which took jagged bites out of the sunset ; but a little farther along the valley opened out to a plain of great extent. Pointing excitedly to the north-west, he indicated a purple cluster of conical mountains, emerging from the horizon.

"There," he cried. "Uko, uko, uko, pitali," his voice dying to a whisper as he spoke, to denote great distance, "near those hills is the ivory we go to fetch. And before we leave this place the senhores should decide which route to take."

The words of the *capitão* grated harshly upon their ears. During the latter stages of the march they had found it agreeable to forget its design, the fact being that the nearer they approached the scene of action the less did they like the character of their work. When Max had unfolded his scheme their morality had been worn threadbare. They were aching to be revenged for the humiliation and loss that they had suffered at the hands of Makombi, and any chief with a black skin was fair game to them. For the rest, Max's hospitality had lulled their remaining scruples, and it had been imperative that they should get into harness as soon as possible.

But the march from Orobo had made different men of them. The subjection of a disorderly pack of bandits to discipline of a kind was a fine performance. Desborough was mainly responsible

Nearing the Goal.

for this achievement, and though they had made no election he stood as leader. The others were too desultory to trouble about detail or routine, though they gave their support whole-heartedly when called upon. And he felt it poignantly that his first opportunity of showing his mettle came in so poor a cause.

But mental procrastination was now out of the question. They had come to a cardinal point in their journey, and plans must be made. The Masungus, gathered round one of their veterans, were eagerly pointing and gesticulating in the direction of Tembe's country. Yet the three men found it difficult to fix their minds on the vital issue. Desborough watched a flight of locusts in the valley beneath, moving along like a white, shimmering, silken veil. Anderson was wondering whether he would wade or be carried across the river that lay ahead of them. It was Kip who finally broke the silence. Turning to the others with something like a sigh, he remarked :

"My word, ain't it lonely? Feels like Moses on Nero's lonely mountain, watchin' out for the promised land." And as they turned slowly towards the village, the crimson ebbed from the west, the first chill breeze of evening swept up the valley, and the gauze-like cloud of locusts fluttered down to earth.

The name of this village was Pormula. Here a

The Ivory Raiders.

somewhat prolonged halt was necessary in order to collect sufficient food to provide against any emergency that might arise. The country stretching onwards to Tembe's kraals was barren, and matters might not go well with them in the territory of that chief. Binzi estimated that three days would be the shortest time in which the commissariat might be replenished.

The men pitched the tent near the stream, and close by the Masungus made an encampment, glad of a respite from the monotony of daily marches, while the carriers fraternised with the village folk. There was a holiday feeling about the company. Three days of blessed laziness were before them, days to be filled with tobacco-smoke, story-telling, and the excitement of watching the servants of the white man bargaining for food. The influence of their leaders, the fellowship of travel, and the method of sharing alike had given a feeling of homogeneity to the dissimilar groups which formed the party. The Masungus had forgotten their resentment towards their leaders. They had been catered for plentifully. After all it was easier to buy goats—when somebody else paid the bill—than to steal them, and they were shrewd enough to acknowledge the dominion of this trinity. The carriers no longer watched their half-brethren as the chickens watch the hawk; rough jests and pleasantries were

Nearing the Goal.

exchanged between them; and as to their attitude towards the white folk, no man before had treated them to such open-handed justice; their behaviour, good or evil, had been rewarded, and they worshipped the hands that tended them.

It had become the custom of these three derelicts to reserve the discussion of any unpleasant topic until after supper. Tempers were then less restive, and prospects became less grey. The little plateau was cheerfully astir with the bustle of an encampment when they filled their pipes for the first smoke of the evening. A score or more of fires lit up the towering rock behind, and the waters bubbled in the cooking-pots, encouraging men to laugh and sing of the evening meal, for the native eats later in the night than the white man.

As usual, Kip was the first to open an unwelcome conversation.

"Well, mates, the stage is about ready, the curtain's soon agoin' to ring up, and we've got to play our bloomin' parts. Enter first villain. Come on, David, speak up."

"Aye, but I reckon it ain't goin' to be no play-actor's job," retorted Anderson moodily.

"You're right, my son. But thinkin' is pretty well played out now. We'll soon 'ave to start in and do something. We've 'ad the picnic part—now we've got to earn our pay."

The Ivory Raiders.

"What I can't stomach," said Desborough, "is Max's plan of making friends with Tembe first, in order to get an opening to attack his village and collar his goods after. I don't mind fighting Tembe anyhow or anywhere he likes, but I won't abuse his hospitality."

"Well, why not sail right in and fight for the stuff straight out, honest like?" said Kip. "Each take a third of the men and attack at night. That's the game I like. It's gentlemanly, anyhow."

"Why? Because it ain't the contract," retorted Anderson; "and we shouldn't get the ivory, neither. These half-breed chaps would never climb stockades with armed men behind 'em. Treachery, cutting throats, and firin' huts is their business, and I don't suppose they have got their equals. It's a rotten job, still we have got to do as the Dutchman said if we mean to get that ivory. He studied the subject and knows. Once our chaps get out of hand it won't be fightin', it will just be bloody murder, and they will kill and burn everything they come across, except, I suppose, enough women and kids to cart the stuff away. I don't suppose they want much of *that* work for themselves! For one, I despise the job, but we've started in, and I don't see how we can go back."

"We're between the devil and the deep sea," said Kip. "Mr. Max is the devil (begging old Nick's pardon), and the deep sea's full of fightin'."

Nearing the Goal.

niggers an' sudden death. Suppose we toss for it?"

"What's the good?" replied Desborough. "If the coin came down for us to return, we shouldn't do it. We should none of us take kindly to being labelled cowards."

"We needn't go back to Max at all, for that matter," said Kip. "We're not so very much farther from the coast than Orobo, if we cut across—not that I'm suggestin' a return," he added hastily.

"Besides," continued Bob, "there are our partners to consider. We don't trust them overmuch, but they've invested their money in us, and we've got to do our best for them. It's no good moralising now. It's too late. We ought to have thought of all this the night we signed the agreement. But we didn't. We merely got drunk. I'm not sweet on this affair, but going back seems out of the question. I agree with Kip. Let's push on nearer the kraals and reconsider. If it is possible to make a bold night attack, for heaven's sake let's do so. If not, we must take some other course."

"That's the game for me," agreed Kip. "But supposin' we look on the bright side of things. If we don't lift this 'ere ivory somebody else will, that's a cert. Arabs, most like, and their work's simple hell. Now we shall be a check to any devilry on our side, so it's much kinder for us to raid the stuff

The Ivory Raiders.

than leave it to the Arabs. Angel Gabriel, kindly note !”

“Perhaps,” said Anderson, almost cheerfully, “the killing won’t all be on the side we expect. We’re taking a sporting risk ourselves. If old Tembe spots us too soon, we’ll provide the corpses, so maybe we are putting on mourning for him a bit early.”

“Oh, bother corpses,” said Kip. “Let’s talk of something cheerful. What are you going to do with the spondulicks, David, if we get them ?”

Anderson gave some thought to the question before he answered.

“Get quit of this blighted country first. Then if my share mounts to anything decent I’ll go to England. There’s things called annuities. I’d put my cash in one and take a small farm with a bit of fishin’ near by. I reckon I could do pretty tidy. I don’t quite know how I’d take the whisky question yet, though. That’s been my trouble out here. Getting into settlements with just enough money not to be worth saving, and running foul of their beastly tanglefoot. Once you start there’s no chance of getting rid of your thirst till you’re stony broke and back on cold tea again. But living regular in England I could do better, I reckon. Leastways, I’d try.”

“Hearken to the aspirations of a nineteenth century freebooter,” said Desborough ironically. “I

Nearing the Goal.

suppose you're going home to build a church, Kip?"

"No, a pub; or rent one anyway, out in the bloomin' country, and I'll rear turkeys. I'm death on turkeys, and I'll take prizes at shows all round. Katie and I will get spliced at Durban, and we'll go 'ome second class by the Castle line. What's your lay, Bob? London and the flesh-pots?"

Desborough laughed. The course mapped out for him by his father sounded improbable enough to pass for fiction, so he answered without hesitation:

"Return home, and go into Parliament."

"Rats!" retorted Kip. "A boardin' house is more in your line. You go and look out for a nice gal with a tidy sum o' money, say five 'undred a year, an' get married."

They talked more openly now than they had done before of their hopes and fears, until the fires burned low and the granite peak was lost in the darkness; till the voices around them were lulled, and the laughter became rare and subdued, and recumbent figures lost their poise and relaxed into silent clusters of sleeping humanity.

The task of collecting food was begun next day. Word had been sent to the adjoining villagers, telling them to grind their corn and bring it in for barter. Towards evening little family groups ventured from their eyries, carrying their surplus supplies. They were eager to see these strange

The Ivory Raiders.

men who were about to penetrate the unknown country beyond. In front stalked the good-man, scantily clad at the waist with a goat-skin, armed with a bow and half-a-dozen arrows viciously barbed. Behind came women, sons and daughters, down to the smallest of the family bearing on its head a wicker-basket containing a gourdful of ground millet. They looked a spare-limbed, downtrodden people, with large, patient eyes. Some drove obstreperous goats; others carried fowls, suspended head downwards, which screeched at every step. The poorest were content to bring but a few tomatoes or eggs. Then followed the bargaining. Seated on their bales, their wares displayed to excite covetousness, Jim and Juão received these traders surrounded by a large audience. Every move was watched and criticised, accompanied by a fusillade of grunts of approval or derision. Nothing was too trivial to be contested, and half-an-hour of chaffering sometimes failed to add a day's rations for a single man.

On this peaceful little plateau the trio found it difficult to believe that they were in barbarous Africa. They noticed, however, there was always a sentinel on the alert. A large boulder, on the side of the cliff, shaded by an acacia tree, formed the village council-place and club. No matter how animated the proceedings, one keen-eyed man lay on his belly scrutinising the

Nearing the Goal.

valley. Not a movement occurred but it was reported and discussed ; every arrival was signalled and interpreted from afar. Through the hazy noon-day heat, during the hour of pleasant gossip before sunset, or in the biting cold that comes with the dawn, this look-out was never empty—one man was always at his post. The surface of the boulder was worn by the contact of generations of watchers.

On the fourth evening, as they were getting weary of inaction, Binzi and Juão came and squatted on the ground before them. Sufficient food had now been collected for their purpose, Binzi reported. All through the country the harvest was being gathered, and he was of opinion that they should push on and attack Tembe without delay. The caravan could start in the morning if their excellencies would give the word, but he wished to ascertain which road they preferred. There were two. The one ran north-easterly in a direct line to Tembe's kraals. This was seldom used, as there was no communication between the two tribes except when a war was in progress. The other went in a more northerly direction, passing some thirty miles eastwards of the kraals, and going on to a more distant tribe. There was not much to choose in the condition of the two roads ; each was overgrown and in poor order. In Binzi's opinion the latter route was the safer, since, if their approach were discovered, they could say

The Ivory Raiders.

that they had travelled from a British station near the lake, a statement that would greatly aid their plans. Both roads passed, however, through uninhabited country, because the Asenga were not desirable neighbours. Binzi did not wish to hasten the senhores, but he would be glad to have their instructions.

They agreed that it would be more politic to take the second path, and the *capitão* withdrew.

They left Pormula at daybreak next morning. Binzi and his Masungus had been astir some hours before, displaying a keenness and activity in making their preparations that betokened an unusual interest in the work before them. At the signal to march they shouldered their rifles and equipment, disappearing in single file like a long snake. The white men followed, and as they plunged down the path from the village, the mists shrouding the hillside, and the tall millet-stalks plucking at them with flabby wet fronds, they felt the sorriest-minded freebooters that had ever shouldered a rifle. In a rash moment they had undertaken a perilous enterprise, and the thought of victory now appealed to them but little more than the thought of defeat. It was a heavy, depressing morning, and their spirits fell with every step as they stumbled down the hill.

“If the blasted sun would only shine,” cried Anderson, “or the wind blow, or something happen

Nearing the Goal.

to show the world is still alive, I shouldn't mind. But everything's so still." This remark evoked no reply.

"I can't make out what's come over Jim," he resumed, seeking to rouse his spirits by conversation. "He's not the same man since he came back. Seems to have something on his mind. Tell us what it is, Jim, and I promise not to lick you."

The boy appeared nervous at the question. "Nothing, senhor. No feel very well." He trotted ahead, pretending to hurry on the caravan.

"E's all right," growled Kip. "Eats too much, that's all. An' 'ow can you expect a bloke to look cheerful a day like this? I feel as if I was drivin' a hearse at my own funeral."

Desborough walked in front silently.

Before them stretched a plain covered with a tangled bush which seemed desirous of winning the pathway back to its birthright. The soil under foot was black and oozy, and as they trod their footsteps liberated the aromatic odour of decaying vegetation. A tributary had flung its greedy fingers across this wilderness, draining the sullen waters from its bosom. On the banks of the creeks the thickets batted, and became more knotted, impeding and over-arching the way as in a nightmare. The caravan might be entering the region of the Styx. A blood-red sun peered over their shoulders, making the undergrowth mysterious and

The Ivory Raiders.

repellent. Nor was this jungle uninhabited. The advance of the caravan disturbed a vicious population of wasps which had secured their bag-like homes among the overhanging twigs, and when a callous, brawny carrier swung his way beneath them, the fiery-tailed little demons came fuming forth and drove their stings into the flesh of the nearest intruder. Then came confusion, laughter, oaths, a plunge into the bush to escape the onslaught, and a general detour followed by a stolid advance. They trudged on doggedly. The carriers, soft after their rest, clamoured for a halt, but the leaders were determined. The atmosphere was fever-laden. Later in the day a light breeze cleared the miasmic mists, and their spirits rose.

But on the second day they got clear of the undergrowth, and the change was magical. An open, park-like country stretched before them, dotted with plumed clumps of *Raphia* palms, and trees which showed their delight in segregation from the forest by added stature and spreading boughs. The earth was green with pasture grass, lit up by starry mimosa bushes and flowering shrubs. A pair of water-bucks bounded away on sighting the strangers. These were the only living things visible; but away to the north-west, clearly outlined against the evening sky, stood the conical mountains which marked their goal; they

Nearing the Goal.

seemed to have grown many sizes bigger since the travellers left Pormula.

The caravan pushed on rapidly, marching until dusk, sleeping lightly, and rising before daybreak. Swift action was essential for success. Their course lay so that they would come abreast of the mountains some thirty miles to the east, and the *capitão* informed them that when the sun slanted over their left shoulders, throwing shadows the length of a man, they ought to reach the intersecting path which led to Tembe's country. That was their turning-point.

He had detached men to scout far ahead. It was imperative that the advance of so large a body of armed men should not be discovered by any roving Asenga. At signals the main part halted, ready to dive into any cover that would conceal them ; but the alarms were unfounded. What appeared to be men, on closer inspection invariably proved scattered herds of antelope.

Now the bearing of the Masungus had intensified. They no longer swaggered along in groups of twos and threes, but in close Indian file threaded their way across the plain, talking, gesticulating, and ever pointing towards the mountains, as they exchanged opinions on the best method of attack. They seemed to have smelt blood, and the good-natured, listless vagabonds of the past days had reverted to their old sinister demeanour. Even the carriers

The Ivory Raiders.

were changed men. At the villages they had procured, in exchange for long-hoarded empty meat-tins, bottles and trash discarded by their masters, some inoffensive-looking spears and flimsy shields. These they flourished with warlike gestures, dancing, singing, and boasting of the havoc they would create among the enemy. During halts they sharpened their weapons, and the Masungus cleaned and greased their rifles.

The day wore on. The mountains came more and more abreast of them, growing more lofty and assuming different shapes and proportions. Every man, with the exception of the trio, was eager to win the distinction of being the first to sight the cross-way, scrambling on to mounds and ant-heaps as they passed, and even scaling adjacent trees, but without reward. Evening drew near, and they were still short of their destination. Extreme care was given to the selection of a camping ground, as a fire incautiously lit might betray their presence. At last a spot was found in a hollow shaded by trees and sheltered from the west by a flat-topped hill, which several of the Masungus ascended in order to prospect the country ahead. Desborough noticed two of them looking intently northwards. After a hurried conversation they took their rifles and disappeared over the hill.

CHAPTER XII.

STRANGERS AHEAD !

BEFORE the orange tints of sunset had been driven from the west by the sapphire of the night, the moon had risen, a dusky, lemon-coloured sphere which dwindled in size and intensified in brilliancy as it mounted the sky. It seemed to have come to keep a watch on the doings of the party.

After supper the raiders sent for Binzi to acquaint him of their plans. Unanimously they had decided to abandon the Dutchman's suggestion of ingratiating themselves with Tembe in order to make a breach in his defence. Each in turn had declined to carry out the betrayal, and they abandoned the notion without regret. Instead, Desborough and a party of picked men were to push ahead and reconnoitre; the rest were to follow with due speed. On receiving the reports of the scouts, dispositions were to be made for a general assault, which was to be delivered at the earliest opportunity.

The *capitão* objected volubly. This was white man's madness! Why give away a point in a game that must be fought to the end? Would Tembe consider their feelings if he caught

The Ivory Raiders.

them unawares? And the Masungus they were brave, brave as lions But they had had little experience in this kind of warfare. Assuredly the excellencies would think better of this rashness. His men had wives and children. Why sacrifice their lives when a little strategy would do as well?

Whilst they were talking the two Masungus, whom Desborough had earlier observed to set out, returned hot and excited. Instantly they were surrounded by their comrades, who listened open-eyed to a dramatic recital of their doings. A discovery of importance had been made. The three men sprang to their feet to learn the news, which Juão brought them, quivering with excitement.

A caravan of Arabs had been discovered some five miles to the north. From the top of the hill, these men had seen figures moving in the far distance. Their curiosity had been aroused, and they had gone forth to investigate.

"Jerusalem!" cried Anderson. "What are they here for?"

Binzi made a gesture of despair. "Assuredly, senhores, they come to steal our ivory. *Diabo!* We are too late."

"I'll be damned if we are," retorted Kip. "If old Tembe's goose has to be cooked, we'll do the cooking, or know the reason why."

The knowledge that a rival was in the field changed the whole aspect of the business. It

Strangers Ahead !

stimulated them like a powerful tonic. Though they had had but poor stomachs for the task themselves, they could stand no one else performing it. The news strung their spirits to fighting pitch, and they agreed that these rascally Arabs must be out-manceuvred at any cost.

"See all the fires are put out, Jim," commanded Anderson. "We don't want them to spot us."

"Ascertain how many they are, Juão," said Desborough. But figures were a weak point with the Masungus. "Twice, three times, four times as many as their excellencies had followers. Who could say? They were very numerous, and all were armed."

"We must get better information than that, boys," said Bob. "Jim, ask Binzi if he will come with me and scout."

"Aye," said Anderson, "and if they're not very strong we might lay into them at once. Supposing you take a messenger with you, and if you think fit we'll bring the whole caravan along. Better deal with them here than nearer Tembe's place and rouse the whole country-side."

Binzi was willing. He was shown a hillock some three miles to the north of the camp. From that point the fires of the Arabs could be observed, he was informed. They were sheltered from the west and north, but the reflection could

The Ivory Raiders.

be perceived from the south. Taking a third man to act as messenger, if required, they set forth.

The ground was level, dotted with open scrub, and the scouts sped along in the moonlight at a goodly pace. The *capitão* had acquired a few common words of English; Desborough had picked up some phrases both in Portuguese and the native dialect, so that with the aid of gesticulation some sort of intercourse was possible. Before they had gone a mile Binzi gave an ejaculation, stopped and pointed.

“Njira, senhor Road.”

It was the cross-way that they had looked for so eagerly on the preceding day. Starting from a village on the shore of the great lake, it twined through herbage and bush into the heart of the continent, a grey ribbon of a path worn by centuries of roving footsteps. Through forest, ravine and kraal it went; now faint and almost untraceable, now widening to the tread of a populous district, deviating and uncertain; yet it pursued its way even to the mangrove swamps that poison the verge of the Atlantic. Binzi examined its surface eagerly. There was no trace of human footprints, only the dainty footprints of a bush-buck.

They proceeded on their errand with celerity. Reaching the hillock they saw the play of firelight on the foliage of the trees some distance ahead. The Arabs had chosen a spot similar to their own

Strangers Ahead !

camping ground, and it was sheltered from any prying eyes that might be directed from the country of the Asenga. It now became expedient to exercise great caution. Binzi told the third man to await their return. Divesting himself of his loose cotton skirt, which might attract notice, he rolled the garment tightly round his loins. Desborough fortunately wore nothing conspicuous. Then they glided forward, taking advantage of the contour of the ground and of every scrap of cover.

After awhile they could distinguish the noises of the encampment—the hubbub of conversation and the exaggerated, affected coughing of a hemp-smoker; then a high-pitched voice shouting an order. They flung themselves into the shadow of a bush and cocked their rifles, thinking that their approach had been reported by scouts, but it was a false alarm. Instead, they heard the thwack of a sjambok and a terrible cry for pity.

Desborough went cold in his bones, and would have crouched in the shadow until the cries ceased. But Binzi was an opportunist. Realising that the eyes of the Arabs would probably be turned towards the flogging, he murmured “Quick, quick!” and darted forward. Skirting wide of the firelight he made for the protection of some rocks. They did the last hundred yards crawling through the undergrowth on their stomachs, Desborough in dread at each movement that he might put his hand on a

The Ivory Raiders.

snake. At last Binzi, who was half a length in front, placed a hand on his shoulder. They had reached the edge of a ledge of rock which commanded a view of the camp.

Screened by the foliage of a bush they peered eagerly through, and saw a large company seated round their various fires. There was no doubt of their being a war party, for they carried no baggage beyond a light kit and their weapons. And these would have furnished a military museum. Every man had a rifle, in most cases of modern construction, though every type was represented, from the Mauser to the antique, brass-bound flintlock musket. Powder-horns and bullet-wallets sat beside cartridge belts. They were well equipped for butchery, and their knives were as diverse in pattern as their firearms. Yataghans, native dirks, oriental daggers, and a dozen other weapons, curved and straight, for slashing and stabbing, stuck out from belts and sashes.

Like the Masungus, the majority of the soldiery were as black as the common negro, though here and there men, evidently of a higher caste, had complexions no darker than sand. Many had shrouded themselves in burnouses. Brown, hairy legs projected from oft-mended, discoloured kaftans. Some wore turbans, others fezes, or plaited straw coverings of outrageous dimensions. The African love of finery was demonstrated in many cases

Strangers Ahead !

by weather-beaten zouave jackets with tinsel embroidery work ; others sported metal and ivory bangles, barbarous ornaments, and a weird assortment of charms.

Strewn about were a few musical instruments to enliven the camping hours—tom-toms and two-stringed guitars with tortoiseshell backs—but these were now neglected. The rank and file had eaten their suppers, and were amusing themselves by roasting green mealies and smoking leaf-cigarettes and pipes of many strange patterns. After a careful observation Desborough concluded that, from their appearance, these men could give points in villainy to the Masungus.

In the centre of the assembly were three men, seated on mats. They were conspicuous from the rest by the richness of their costume and the service they exacted. One was a young man of about thirty, with Arab features, well-bred, but weak in their expression, cruel, and sensual. He wore a magnificent crimson turban, and an orange-coloured sash at his waist. His finger-nails were carefully tinted with henna. On his left sat a composed, elderly man with a skin the colour of teak, who looked as though he might have been a Nonconformist minister, had he been born of English stock. The third was a squat, coal-black ruffian, obviously competent to perform all the cut-throat work that might be asked of him. These were the

The Ivory Raiders.

chieftains of the party. Behind them, leaning against a tree, rested three *machillas* with gaudy curtains and coverings. A retinue of slaves attended their masters, handing bowls of rice served with some paste as a relish. This the chiefs rolled deftly into balls and tossed into their mouths. As Bob watched, the meal finished; the servants brought gourds of water, which they poured on their masters' hands, and live coals to light their tobacco. Then he noticed, lying face downwards on the ground, the figure of a man, whose hands were tied behind a heavily-lacerated back, and he knew from whom the cries had proceeded.

But he had not come as a sight-seer, so he began to compute the number of fighting men. Hastily averaging those seated around each fire, he concluded they must muster some eight hundred strong.

Binzi, who had lain beside him, watching with gleaming eyes, now whispered to him: "See, senhor, Arab no sleep here; no make *maçassa*."

Desborough took his meaning. The Arabs had made no preparation for the night. Only a little firewood had been cut, and their kits had been unloosed merely for the purpose of making a meal.

"Come along," added the *capitão*; "go back now."

Without turning they wormed their way backwards, but before they had gone many yards a

Strangers Ahead !

man near them threw a bough of dried leaves on to a fire. The flames spurted up joyously, casting a bright light into the bush. Fortunately they were shielded by the undergrowth, but they flattened themselves on the earth and lay motionless. As the blaze was subsiding Binzi gripped his companion's arm and pointed stealthily. For a second Bob could distinguish nothing but bush and rock : then he discerned what had caught the *capitão's* eye. Another scout was watching the camp ! Not twenty yards from them, still as the boulders amongst which he crouched, was the figure of a man scrutinising the Arabs every whit as closely as they had done. He seemed to be the ordinary Kaffir common to those parts, but in the hasty glance they had of him his costume struck them as unusual. Only the upper part of his body was exposed, and that was clad in a grey flannel shirt ; on his head he wore a black sepoy cap, an article generally associated with men attached to Europeans. Then the figure faded from their sight. After a short pause, Binzi touched Desborough's arm, and, slightly altering their course, they crawled farther from the camp. Soon they were able to use their legs, and they raced back to the spot where they had left their man.

After a disjointed consultation, composed as much of signs as words, they agreed to leave the man to watch the movements of the Arabs ;

The Ivory Raiders.

then they started back at a steady trot for their own encampment.

It was nearly midnight when they arrived. Anderson and Kip were nervously awaiting them.

"This is a rum go, ain't it?" remarked David, when they had been acquainted with the character of the Arab force. "What are we to do now?"

"Do?" Why, keep them bloomin' well from jumpin' our ivory," retorted Kip. "That's what I feel up for, with my dyin' breath!"

"It looked to me as if they will take some stopping," said Desborough. "But I can't understand that other chap. What was he up to?"

"Come from some village, I suppose, to see what was happenin'. We haven't got the monopoly of starin' at the brutes, have we?" replied Kip.

"But the nearest kraals are Tembe's, thirty miles away."

"By gum, you're right," whispered Anderson. "These Asenga have sent out scouts. For all we know they may be watching us."

The suggestion was startling, and they glanced round anxiously at the surrounding bush. Then Desborough shook his head.

"I don't think so, boys. That nigger did not look like an Asenga—or rather what I expect to find an Asenga looking like. I only had a peep at him, but he had somehow the style of a nigger coming from a settlement."

Strangers Ahead !

"You might easily have been mistaken," suggested Anderson. "And besides, if he did have a grey shirt and a cap on, it don't mean much. It might have been some of the stuff Max left when he was up before. I once met a nigger who had never seen a white man; he was dressed in one of them ties they wear with evenin' dress, along with a monkey-skin moocha."

"Well, one thing seems pretty certain," said Desborough. "These chaps are after Tembe's ivory, and if he has spotted them so much the better. They are a long way too strong for us by ourselves. I vote we follow along cautiously, keeping an eye on them. When they attack Tembe we might lend him a hand, and between us lick the Arabs. Then we ought to be master of the situation."

"If that's our game," suggested Kip, "we ought to push along and join Tembe on the Q. T. before the Arabs attack. We should be in a stronger position."

"We might, or we mightn't," said Anderson. "If that nigger belonged to Tembe, we should be all right. If he didn't, Tembe might think our yarn about the Arabs was a bluff, and try to hoof us out of the country for a start, and that would make things fairly easy for the Arabs."

Binzi was then consulted. He was in favour of Desborough's plan, which was finally adopted.

The Ivory Raiders.

They had had a fatiguing day, and the morrow was likely to be still more arduous, so they decided to get what rest they could. The Masungus and carriers were warned to prepare enough provisions to carry them over two days, in order to avoid long halts and the need of fires. As they were about to turn in, the man whom they had left to watch the Arabs returned, reporting that the caravan had resumed its march westward.

"The deuce!" said Desborough. "It looks as if they are going to get a long way ahead of us. Oughtn't we to be going on now?"

"We'll catch 'em up to-morrow right enough," replied Anderson. "I expect they are anxious to get close enough to Tembe's place to reconnoitre. Anyway, it's no good moving till we're ready. That's the quickest way to travel slowly. Let's have a snooze and start as early in the morning as we can." A steady snore from Kip seconded this counsel.

But the start next morning was even later than usual. Desborough and Binzi, the chief instigators of early rising, were tired out. As no one could tell how the party would fare in the next forty-eight hours, many rearrangements were made with the loads, the ammunition was served out, and extra rations given to the men. In consequence the sun was high in the sky before word was given to march.

Strangers Ahead !

A light rain had fallen through the night, and the morning was fresh and beautiful. The caravan stepped forward briskly. All were in fine spirits again, for the difficulties and complications that had arisen had to a large extent obliterated the sinister aspect of the enterprise, giving it more the air of a daring adventure. But the chapter of surprises was only beginning.

As they approached the cross-path, they observed the foremost Masungus examining the ground with the keenest interest. A numerous body of men had passed by that morning since the rains !

"The Arabs must have come down this way," said Desborough. "Lord, what a close shave for us !"

"But the Arabs left before the rain, stoopid !" retorted Kip, "and they were four miles north of this. You bet they won't trouble no roads. They'll stick to the bush."

The footprints were confused and indistinct, owing to the number of feet that had trodden the narrow track, but Anderson followed them along with the eye of an old hunter, and it was he that made the next discovery. Suddenly he gave a shout. The others ran up to him.

"Look !" he cried, pointing to the earth. "See here ! There's a cove with the party wears boots—veldtschoens, or I'm a nigger."

"Lord love us !" ejaculated Kip. "Somebody must have been advertising this place as a health

The Ivory Raiders.

resort. It's getting too popular for us. I suppose the beggar's after our ivory too."

"There's another here," said Desborough. "It looks like a shooting boot, with nails in it. I wonder if this is another raiding party, led by two white men. The situation is getting interesting."

"They must have passed after the rain and before daybreak," said Anderson, "or else they were bound to spot our camp. It was pretty dark and cloudy then. Gad! They must be in a hurry!"

"Well, an' what's our startin'-price?" queried Kip. "We're goin' to be left proper if we don't foot it too. It ain't no good standin' here."

"I see it," said Desborough. "That chap who was watching the Arabs last night belongs to this pack. He went back to his boss and reported that the Arabs were on the go. Old Boots"—he pointed to the trail—"wants to get in first, so he struck camp as soon as he could, and he is now between us and Tembe."

"I told you so," snapped Kip. "I said last night we ought to get in and oil up to Tembe first. Now this beggar will queer our pitch."

"We must catch him," said Desborough. "They may only be ordinary traders; but if they are after the tusks it might be well to come to an understanding. Between us we could knock the Arabs out in one act. Come along, we are bound to catch up with them if we stick to it."

Strangers Ahead !

They set off at a round pace, cursing the lateness of their start. Mile after mile they covered, leaving the sweating carriers far behind them. The road traversed an open country of flat-topped ridges and spacious valleys. Frequently they could see ahead for a couple of miles, but no sign of a living creature did they espy.

"These coves 'ave got the seven-league boots," said Kip. "We'll never catch them!"

About noon they came to a small stream, and halted for a "breather."

"Well!" cried Anderson, "Boots & Co. have had a spell here also. A wooden pipe has been knocked out on this stone. One of 'em smokes Boer 'baccy."

They scrutinised the ground closely. Desborough made the next find. He picked up a cigarette end and examined it with the eye of a connoisseur.

"His pal has a pretty taste in cigarettes. Let's catch the beggar and ask him for some. I would sooner have one of these than a tusk of ivory."

"That's old Square-toes, I'll swear," said Kip. "Veldtschoens smokes the Boer stuff. They go together more."

"Ask Binzi what he makes of the business, Jim," said Desborough.

"He t'inks dem war party, senhor. Many, many men, but not have many loads. Plenty few marks on ground."

The Ivory Raiders.

"They're out after the ivory, for a sovereign," asserted Kip.

"Never mind," said Anderson. "Let us leave them to fight it out between themselves, then we can come in at the end and be top dog."

"I'd like five words with them first," replied Desborough. "Come on, let's be going."

But the others demurred. The carriers were still far behind, and it was unwise in such a country to be much separated. Moreover, there was the danger of coming in touch with the Arabs, since both parties must be converging towards one direction. After a short consultation they detailed three of the younger and most intelligent of the Masungus to strike off at right angles to the path, pick up the trail of their rivals and shadow them, reporting their movements to the *capitão* by means of the third man. Six more men under Binzi were told off to go ahead at full speed. If they came up with the mysterious owners of the boots they were to endeavour to persuade them to await the arrival of the white men, who would follow as swiftly as possible. There were still five hours or more of daylight before them. In that time they might draw very close to Tembe's kraals. With so much combustible material moving, an explosion could not long be delayed.

The carriers came straggling in. They had accomplished fifteen miles that day, and needed a

Strangers Ahead !

rest before proceeding further. But further inaction was beyond the limit of the leaders' patience, so they resolved to leave Jim in charge to bring the bearers along in a body after a brief halt. Any danger was likely to lie ahead of them, with the armed force intervening. Then the fighting men pushed on.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

THE trio were in the height of condition, and mile after mile was covered at a swinging trot. The Masungus were as keen as their leaders. Yet they saw nobody. The bush was deserted. It seemed to have swallowed up every living thing—Arabs, strangers, Binzi, scouts and all. After a time the desolation became uncanny. They could not have mistaken the path, because no divergence could have escaped the hundreds of eager eyes that followed. Desborough recalled the stories he had read of enchanted forests, and wondered if these footprints which mocked all their energy were made by evil spirits luring them to destruction. The sun slanted more obliquely into their eyes, and bathed the leaves of the woodland in a golden sheen. Not a soul came in sight. At last they called a halt for a few minutes.

"This is the rummiest go I was ever in," said Kip, fanning himself with his hat. "Where's everybody got to?"

"Aye, those chaps with the boots can walk!" panted Anderson. "I thought they must have

At Close Quarters.

dodged off into the bush somewhere back, but I saw the print of Square-toes a little while ago as plain as a pikestaff."

"He means reaching Tembe's to-night, sure enough," said Desborough.

"But what his game is I can't quite make out."

"Can't you?" said Kip. "Well, I can tell yer. It is the old fable of the man and the horse. He's going to ride Mr. Tembe against the Arabs, and jockey 'im out of the ivory afterwards. But 'e's got to 'ave a reckonin' with our little lot before 'e does that. Our guns can talk as well as 'is?"

As they were resting one of the Masungus who had been on scout came running along the path. Here at last was some information. Through Juão, he told them that they had struck the trail of the Arabs a couple of miles north of the midday halting-place. They had followed it for some distance without coming up with the caravan. His comrades were still on the scent, but he had come in to report. The Arabs were pursuing a course through the bush parallel to the road.

"Well, I suppose we had better get on till we find Binzi," said Desborough. "He can't be far off now."

The track was verging towards a dip in a ridge that had long obscured their view of the country beyond. They toiled on wearily, but a tonic

The Ivory Raiders.

awaited them at the top. Binzi and his scouts were hiding in the shelter of a large shrub. He signalled to them to approach cautiously. Tembe's kraals were visible from this point !

Taking care not to allow their figures to show upon the skyline, they anxiously surveyed the country. The sun had set and the light was beginning to fail, but they saw before them a plain several miles in width, terminated abruptly by the range of mountains that had so long served them as a landmark. It was intersected by a stream fed by tributaries from the high land. Surrounded by fields of sorghum and indian-corn, a dozen villages were scattered, one of which caught the eye instantly by reason of its size and good estate. Rectangular in form, it was protected by mud walls skirted with euphorbia bushes. Conspicuous among the huts were four large circular buildings, which, Binzi told them, housed the coveted ivory. He pointed eagerly to a hut standing in a cleared space about the centre of the enclosure, and informed them that this was Tembe's house, and that it was stockaded by tusks of ivory. This village was evidently regarded as the citadel, the others being meagre and but weakly fortified. The main kraal was barely three miles distant.

"Don't it look peaceful?" murmured Anderson. "I wonder if we should have had the heart to attack if these other chaps had not come along."

At Close Quarters.

"Ask him where old Boots has gone, Juão," said Desborough.

"Ah, senhores," replied the *capitão*, "we did our best. We ran like bush-bucks after you despatched us, and at last we thought we had caught up with the gringos. We saw them pass over this very ridge, and we ran harder. But when we got here, they were far down towards the kraals, and we were afraid to show ourselves to the Asenga. From this spot we watched them go down boldly to the chief village, halting within a short gun-shot. The people from the nearest kraals ran away into the bush on their approach, they were taken so completely by surprise. Then the leaders went forward with two servants, all unarmed. Presently men came from the big village, and they talked and talked for a long time. One of the white men kept pointing to the forest on this side. At last, after a long palaver, the Asenga withdrew to their village. Presently they sent gourds of drink out to the white men, who called up their followers. Then all went within the walls."

"The 'ounds!" exclaimed Kip furiously. "They are just suckin' up to old Tembe over those Arabs, intending to rob 'im all the while. Let's go down too."

"But, Jim," said Desborough, "ask him if these chaps might not have been traders."

"No, senhor, they had no goods. They travelled

The Ivory Raiders.

with fewer loads than any white man I have seen. But they had many rifles, as many as ourselves."

"Which that mutton-headed old mongrel, Tembe, will find to his cost," snarled Kip. "What's our next move?"

"Get our whole gang together," said Anderson, "and clear off this path somewhere into the bush."

"There is a place down there, excellencies, that I know well," explained Binzi, pointing to a spot about a mile south of the main village. "We can gain it under cover of the forest in the darkness. If we light no fires there is little fear of our being discovered through the night, and to-morrow we must act."

He directed two of the Masungus, who had been attached to the former expedition, to return along the path until they met the carriers. These they were to conduct to the camping ground by a round-about but less exposed route.

They were about to start for this spot themselves when one of the Masungus detected two men advancing towards them with infinite caution from the rear. Binzi was about to give the word to his men to spread out and capture them at any cost when he recognised the scouts who had been following the Arabs. It was now dusk. Emerging from the cover in which the party had been sheltering, he beckoned to them. The Arabs, they reported, were encamped half-an-hour's walk distant. The

At Close Quarters.

caravan had travelled the last part of the journey with much stealth. The scouts had watched them select their camp, and they had observed the leaders, who had been carried the whole distance in *machillas*, set out towards the villages of the Asenga, evidently to reconnoitre.

Thus far the movement of all parties was accounted for. Desborough sought to make no plans until they had sneaked through the underwood to the place selected by Binzi. There, fatigued by the long march, they hungrily devoured some of their cold provisions. It was a cheerless camp. They lit no fires and dared not even strike a match to light their tobacco. Two courses were practicable: to open negotiations with the strangers, or to await the turn of events and snatch the rising opportunity. Everything depended on the movements of the Arabs. If these men attacked shortly, the second alternative became inevitable; if they delayed, a solution must be looked for in the first, since so large a party as the Masungus could scarcely hope to remain undiscovered in that position during the ensuing day. Certainly they might send a messenger to the white men at Tembe's village that evening, but Desborough and Anderson were averse to opening negotiations with strangers without first seeing them, and Kip had taken such an unreasoning antipathy to them that he declared he would sooner fight them than bargain

The Ivory Raiders.

with them. All now turned on the Arabs. Binzi was again consulted.

He was of opinion that in ordinary circumstances the Arabs would not move until daylight. No one in Central Africa cared much for fighting by night. But this particular caravan seemed to have methods of its own, which he could not understand. He was coming to believe that their adventure had been organised by men outside the country, perhaps from Zanzibar. He could not connect the leaders with any description he had heard of the noted Arab leaders in that part of the country. So far these Arabs seemed to be ignorant of the presence of any rivals, and they relied on their own overwhelming strength. So perhaps the chance of striking a sharp, decisive blow might tempt them. The moon was only just past the full; anything might happen! His advice was to let the two parties fight it out—it should be a good fight—and when both were weakened, to turn the scales to their own advantage. This opinion coincided with their individual views. They were too weary to initiate a bolder course, so without further discussion they agreed, and fell asleep.

Desborough dreamed that he sat before a fire which crackled and spat forth ashes at him. He tried to move away to get out of range, awoke, and found that Binzi's hand was on his shoulder. Fighting had already begun at the kraals. Anderson

At Close Quarters.

and Kip were rubbing their eyes, surly at the inconsiderateness of the Arabs in choosing such an early hour for their engagement. Carriers and Masungus, in heavy-eyed amazement, were peering into the underwood around the camp, as though they expected to see therein an elucidation of the noises.

The position of the moon warned them that morning was not far off. Damp air chilled their bones. With an effort Desborough realised that the culminating movement of the enterprise had arisen, and that coolness would now serve them better than fearlessness—but he would have given a guinea for a cup of coffee. The firing, erratic at first, quickened into a boisterous fusillade. They could detect the notes of the various rifles—the loud, boastful explosions of the old-fashioned weapons, the crack of the Martini, and the quiet, persistent utterance of the deadly little repeaters. A light breeze stirred against their faces, bringing with it the sound of distant cries and hoarse shoutings. And in this wild symphony of warfare they fancied they could detect a steady under-roll of shots which spoke of a trained defence. Then the firing lessened, and the noises died swiftly away into silence.

Evidently the attack had failed.

“Come along, boys, let us get forward to some place where we can follow the game,” said Desborough.

The Ivory Raiders.

They had divided the fighting men into three companies, with Binzi, Jim and Juão acting as sergeants. These men now attached themselves to their respective leaders, and at the word of command the raiders set forth in a wide, irregular line through the open timber which skirted the ground under cultivation. At first not a sound could be heard, but suddenly their ears were assailed by cries of terror, and the noise of fugitives bursting through the bushes. The advance stopped as one man, and they saw frantic figures approaching like game driven before the beaters. They were women and children flying for safety. As they came upon the line of Masungus they paused; some dashed through, hardly knowing what they did; the rest, with piteous sobs, turned to the right and left and hurtled away into the darkness.

"It's that what startled them," said Kip, pointing to a column of smoke and flame away to their left. "The Arabs 'ave lit a candle to do their job by, as the moon's got be'ind the mountains."

"They've fired the village a bit sou'west of Tembe's," said Anderson. "I noticed it last night. They will concentrate on the east now, so we ought to be clear on this side."

In a few minutes they had taken up a position among the mealie-stalks on some rising ground which commanded a view of the operations. The burning kraal blazed furiously with a roar and a

At Close Quarters.

crackle that deadened any other sounds. To the right of it was the invested village, a rectangular mass of conical huts illuminated by the crimson glare, which threw deep black shadows on the farther side. They saw figures dart from out of the darkness across the lighted spaces in order to hide in yet profounder obscurity. A party of men were busy strengthening the defences at the entrances.

The Arabs were evidently determined to give their opponents no rest. From the north-west came the sound of rapid firing, and the watchers observed men making a bold demonstration of assault, but the main attack was forming almost at their feet. They could see dark forms mustering thickly, and sweeping forward in the protection of the indian-cornstalks, which grew higher than a man's head.

"I can't stand this much longer," muttered Anderson. "I've got to take a hand before long."

"Best wait and see what this bout brings," returned Desborough. "It won't do to start too soon, or the other chaps won't realise they have anything to thank us for."

The feint on the farther side was drawing a heavy fire from the defence. Over the walls of the kraal the smoke of the rifles drifted slowly away. Little jets of flame and loud explosions marked where the flintlocks were ponderously seeking to destroy, and the fields crepitated with the reports of smaller

The Ivory Raiders.

arms. But now the eastern column was at work. With a wild rush it carried everything before it. Knives slashed a passage through the bushes ; men clambered on to each other's shoulders and mounted the walls, firing into the village with deadly effect, while several drew their knives and leapt down. It seemed as though the assault must prove irresistible, for the suddenness of the onslaught had wrought disorder among the defenders.

At this moment the watchers heard the voice of a European giving orders in a native language. Without the slightest note of haste or temper it directed the fire to be concentrated at the spot where the besiegers were the densest. Evidently his men gained confidence from his calmness and aimed steadily, for the rush was checked ; men fell thickly, then the assault wavered, and the Arabs turned and bolted.

With one exception : a tall gaunt man paused on the wall, and, in a leisurely manner, took note of every detail of the defence ; then, with a menacing gesture towards the garrison, he dropped lightly down and joined his comrades. Desborough recognised the inoffensive-looking man whom he had judged to be one of the captains.

"My word!" exclaimed Kip. "It looks as if these chaps are comin' out on top without our help. Where will we be then? Strike me, for two pins I'd join the Arabs!"

At Close Quarters.

In the east the stars were paling, giving warning of the nearness of day. So fierce had been the conflagration that the burnt village was now but a heap of glowing embers, which emitted merely a dull red glow, except when the breeze momentarily fanned them into flame. The besieged village appeared as a grim black mass, and the fields around were sombre and indistinct.

Anderson gazed anxiously at the sky. "It will be morning soon, and I guess we shall have to evacuate this position. It won't do to be seen until we have decided what we are going to do."

"These Arabs 'ave got their gruel," said Kip. "They're full up, and don't mean makin' any more open attacks. They've learned that there's more be'ind these walls than the Asenga. Say, I wonder who the blighters are! They take things pretty cool."

"I'd like to know," replied Desborough. "They seem strikingly able to take care of themselves, confound them! If we went up now and offered to rescue them, they'd simply smile. We must hold off and wait a bit."

"The Arabs aren't going to give up trying for the ivory yet awhile, don't you fear," said Anderson. "Their leaders are men of experience. They've got one or two tricks up their sleeves, you bet!"

Flat on their stomachs they scanned every inch of the ground. Sometimes they thought that they

The Ivory Raiders.

detected figures creeping towards the kraal. The faint grey shadow of the dawn was approaching, but for the moment the landscape was less distinguishable than during the darkness.

"I believe they've vamoosed," whispered Kip. "I can't see a bloomin' thing. Gawd! I wish somebody would move or shout. I've got the 'ump."

"Did you see that?" whispered Desborough eagerly, a few minutes later. "There goes another." He pointed to the plantation to the north of the village. A spark curved out from the field, glowing intensely in its passage through the air, and fell amidst a cluster of huts within the wall.

"Lord!" ejaculated Anderson. "They are shooting fire-arrows at the thatches. We'll be needed yet."

The garrison did not underrate this new movement. As the next tiny ball of fire whizzed forth from the cultivation a dozen shots were fired at the spot whence it came. So far no damage had been done, but a fiery missile discharged on another flank lodged on a thatch, and a tongue of flame shot up a moment later. Again the spectators heard the cool, imperturbed words of command, and three men clambered on to the roof and beat desperately at the flames with sticks. It was now the Arabs' turn, and they opened a sharp fire. Two of the

At Close Quarters.

men fell, and the bullets knocked up a fountain of sparks and burning straw.

"Gad, it's hot work for them!" ejaculated Desborough. "We will have to lend a hand now. You chaps, muster your men, and be ready."

"There goes another roof," said Kip, "and the breeze is spreadin' the flames. They will be grilled to a turn inside of five minutes."

The defenders were now rushing about wildly, as the conflagration had spread beyond control. For the first time the watchers could distinguish the figures of the two white strangers. One looked a powerful, elderly man with a bushy black beard. He wore a grey flannel shirt, and the ends of his trousers were tucked into his socks. His head was protected by a white pith helmet. His comrade, or partner, was a younger man of tall figure. Except for the broad-brimmed terai hat, he looked as though he might be about to play polo. The conflagration around him disturbed him not a jot. His only weapon was a knobkerrie, which dangled by a leather thong from his wrist. At the moment, he was lighting a cigarette; then he shouted some orders to his men, who at once separated themselves from Tembe's disorderly followers.

"Ain't he a dandy!" exclaimed Kip. "Darned if he don't wear an eyeglass. See it flash!

The Ivory Raiders.

Well, 'e's — well got to take 'is hat off to us when we meet. I can promise 'im that."

The daylight had now arrived. In the attack the plantations had been trampled almost level, and they now afforded little protection; but the Arabs were careless of exposing their bodies, as the defenders were too engaged to fire upon them. Under the direction of their leaders the assailants took up positions to enfilade the walls, in order to gain the fullest advantage from the inevitable sortie. Thus it happened that a large company were lining up in a position not a hundred yards from the ambushed Masungus.

This was their chance. In obedience to the gestures of their leaders, they crept forward like lizards until they obtained an unimpeded view. Shooting from cover was work they excelled in. Then Desborough shouted the command, and they discharged an irregular but deadly volley.

For the moment, the stricken Arabs were stupefied, and they stood huddled together like sheep. They could not grasp the idea of an enemy beyond the foe within the kraals. But as many of the Masungus had breechloaders, and continued a pitiless fire at short range, this new development was soon made cruelly obvious; they broke, and raced back to their comrades on the north of the village, leaving the ground strewn

At Close Quarters.

with men, some twisting and writhing, and others pathetically still.

"Follow, boys!" shouted Desborough, and the three led the way, the Masungus at their heels.

Events now happened swiftly, and fortune turned its back on the Arabs. The force within the kraal, expelled by heat and flames, cleared the north wall and took up a semi-circular position without, flinging themselves on the ground behind any shelter available. They were greeted by a ragged volley from the enemy facing them, but it took little effect compared with the terrible raking from which the Masungus had saved them.

Seeing the defenders abandon the kraal, the Arabs on the west, led by the youngest of the chiefs, came round at a furious charge. They expected to meet shattered and disorganised men: instead, they found themselves swept by a resolute and searching fire, from which they sheered off to what was now the main body on the north. Meantime the trio lined their men in the bushes along the banks of a stream, roughly at right angles to the front of their allies. With the Arabs all was confusion; no one realised truly what had happened. The captains, with desperate bravery, rallied their men and charged, but they were swept by volleys from front and flank. Utterly bewildered, they wavered, turned and fled.

At this, Tembe's followers, who had been skulking

The Ivory Raiders.

since the contest began, rushed to the front and charged the broken ranks with a courage born of desperation, and the rout was made complete.

Shouting to his men to follow him, Desborough struggled across the stream to try and intercept the retreat. But the Masungus were placed very comfortably to obtain the best view at a minimum risk ; they had no intention of exerting themselves for the dangerous honour of thrusting their precious persons between these frantic men and safety. Their leader dashed forward impetuously, his nerves tingling with excitement. He felt that at last he was in the centre of things—an agent, no longer a mere spectator. Looking round to be sure that his men were following, he found that he was alone! The flying Arabs were rushing past not thirty yards from him. In bitter disappointment he pulled up, and stood for a moment irresolute. Then he was aware that a man, flourishing a broad-bladed knife, was charging at him. With a glow of satisfaction, he realised that he was master of himself. Fingering the bolt of his rifle to ensure that it was cocked, he pointed it steadily at the breast of his assailant, and recognised—not without pride—the black, squat, massive figure of the third chief. “ Now ! ” he muttered to himself, and pressed the trigger. No report followed, and the man came on faster than ever. He had forgotten to change his cartridges !

At Close Quarters.

All his self-possession went with the thought. Swinging the harmless weapon round his head, he slung it at his adversary and missed him by a fathom. The man was on him. An instinct, derived from his schooldays, prompted him to throw himself forward and collar his adversary low. The Arab knew nothing of football tactics and so missed his first blow, and the two went down together. Bob was the lighter man, and in an instant had wriggled on top and gripped the wrists of his opponent, but the disparity of strength was overwhelming. With a cruel, venomous smile, the Arab looked up at his adversary. Pausing a moment to gather his strength, he slowly but irresistibly raised himself on his side. Bob shut his eyes, clenched his teeth, and gripped at the wrists till he thought his sinews would snap, but in spite of his efforts the positions were reversed. Suddenly the strain relaxed. Desborough looked up, and saw the brutal face bob downwards, as though it would kiss him. In a spasm of horror he twisted himself free, and was on his feet. Kip was aiming a second blow with the butt of his rifle at the shattered head of the Arab.

The little man was intoxicated by the fight. A third needless stroke followed. Desborough shouted hysterically, "Stop it, Kip. That's enough."

"Very near got your egg hard-boiled that time,

The Ivory Raiders.

cockie," cried Kip. "Come on this way. Let's do for another of 'em." He rushed off.

But to Robert Desborough the glory had gone from the fight. Dizzy and abhorrent, he sat down beside his dead enemy. An aching longing to get away from a country where such scenes of violence were possible took possession of him. Kip's conduct frightened him. Save for his encounter he, too, might have relapsed into a state of primitive barbarism. The fighting had passed away into the forest, and he was conscious of no one near him till he heard a voice saying:

"Feel a bit groggy? Try a nip of this."

CHAPTER XIV.

AT TEMBE'S KRAAL.

DESBOROUGH looked round. The younger of the two strangers was regarding him curiously. He noticed that the other was busily examining the wounded. Both were begrimed with dirt and smoke from the burning kraal. He took the proffered flask and drank a little spirit.

"First experience, I suppose," remarked the new-comer, taking a mouthful himself. "The squeamishness soon wears off."

"I'm rather new at this kind of work," replied Bob lamely. Then he remembered that loyalty to his comrades demanded that he should forthwith tackle this man as to their share in the ivory, but the stranger's attitude deterred him. Though he had been rescued from desperate straits, he assumed with ease a mastery of the situation.

"I don't know where on earth you chaps dropped from, but your assistance was deucedly useful to us."

Desborough felt miserable. This was clearly his opportunity to put in a claim, but his instincts urged him to respond in a courteous and generous

The Ivory Raiders.

fashion. Compromising feebly, he said : " Oh, we can talk about that presently."

The other shot at him a glance, as though revising his first opinion, and Desborough felt he had fallen several pegs. Somehow, the personality of these men fitted very ill with the theory that they were brother freebooters.

" Well, we can safely leave the Arabs to Tembe's crowd now. I've told the *capitão* to recall my Atonga. Come along, and meet Cameron."

At this juncture Anderson returned. He was breathing and perspiring heavily. Saluting the stranger rather defiantly, he gave a look of interrogation at his comrade. Bob knew that it enquired whether he had yet broached the main issue.

" You know," resumed the stranger, by way of explanation, " we relied on Tembe's brother to come to our help to-day. If we were attacked, he was pledged to bring his men down on their flank. But these two brothers love each other so much that each would rather see the other killed than lend a hand. I'll swear he's sitting in his kraals hoping that we and the Arabs would knock each other to bits, so that he could step in and take the ivory."

A grin crept into Anderson's face. Tembe's brother was not the only author of such a wish. Desborough felt a worm !

At Tembe's Kraal.

"It's about that there ivory——" began Anderson; but, to Bob's relief, another diversion was created by the approach of the second stranger.

"I don't know where you've come from, my friends, but your appearance was very welcome to us this morning." He shook hands cordially with Bob and Anderson. A closer view of the man convinced Desborough that they had made a rash conjecture as to their mission. He must get his comrades away for a consultation. The new-comer had a powerful, but kindly face, and he spoke with a faint Scotch accent.

Anderson eyed him with suspicion.

"If you will excuse us," said Bob hurriedly, "we will just get our men together—then, perhaps, you will have breakfast with us?"

To his dismay he saw that the party was about to be completed. Kip was bearing down on the meeting with the impetuosity of an autumn gale.

"Now, mates," he shouted, "we've 'ad the fun, an' we've got to square up about the swag. Mornin', Squaretoes; mornin', Veldtschoens. Say, let's 'ave an arrangement about this 'ere ivory."

The two strangers regarded him with rising interest; then they exchanged significant glances.

"One of your friends, I presume?" enquired the younger of Desborough.

Bob nodded. "Supposing we have a talk later?" he suggested.

The Ivory Raiders.

"Later be damned!" shouted Kip fiercely. "Now is my time. You got in first, we admit," he continued, turning to the others, "but we 'elped you out of a bloomin' death-trap, and we claim half shares. It's that, or you can——well, fight us for it."

"Aye," said Anderson sturdily. "That's our talk."

Neither of the strangers showed any perturbation at the threat. The elder scanned the trio keenly, and the face of the younger set in sterner lines. He it was who replied:

"Are your men under the impression that we came here to raid Tembe's ivory?"

"Just the very same as ourselves, dear boy," returned Kip serenely. "So now let's talk sense."

Desborough was in a high state of nervous apprehension. He knew they had made a vital mistake; but he could speak no word in mitigation. The utmost that he could do was to brace himself up, to stand shoulder to shoulder by his comrades, and to look vastly less miserable than he felt.

The stranger was about to reply stormily, but his friend put a hand on his arm and whispered; the anger swiftly subsided, and he looked at the trio with humorous deliberation.

"I think I had better tell you at once that I am Her Majesty's Commissioner in these parts."

The bolt had fallen even as Desborough had dreaded. During the past few minutes he had been

At Tembe's Kraal.

persistently reminded of Max Klein's description of that potent official by the appearance and behaviour of the younger man. Anderson took the information with wide-eyed amazement, but Kip bridled like a cat that meets a terrier.

"You're a cursed liar!" he shouted. "Smart's 'ome in England, and his deputy's fighting niggers up north; so don't you think you can bluff us out of our rights with your mangy tricks."

The tranquillity of the Commissioner was magnificent. Kip seemed on the point of springing at him, but he calmly maintained his air of amused toleration.

"I don't feel called upon to prove my identity," he said at length, taking out his cigarette case; "but if this will set your mind at rest you are welcome." He handed Desborough a card. "And this is the Rev. Angus Cameron, of the Scotch Mission. His name needs no advertising in this part of Africa."

"Aye," explained the Scotsman, "and I'm the cause of Mr. Smart's being here. I just sent him a cable directly Msoro died, and he made one of his harum-scarum marches, arriving none too soon, as you may believe."

The three heads gathered anxiously above the card. There could be no doubt about it. This immaculate little slip of pasteboard, with the Commissioner's name and the address of his club

The Ivory Raiders.

formally engraved thereon, dispelled their lurking suspicion. Here, then, was the upshot of their enterprise. They had marched, schemed and fought, and their efforts had merely contributed to the success of their partner's deadliest enemy. Into the bargain they had disclosed their own nefarious intentions to the chief magistrate of the country!

Desborough alone retained his composure. He returned the card, with a polite bow.

"I've given over carrying these things myself," he observed. "But my name is Robert Desborough." Even though this declaration landed him straight in gaol he could not have refrained from making it. His stricken self-respect seemed to cry aloud for the formality.

But the result was startling.

For the first time since he had risen that morning the Commissioner's eyeglass fell from its perch.

"Gad!" he cried, "it's my sucking M.P.," and relaxed into roars of laughter.

The production of the visiting card had fairly sobered Kip. One peep had taken all the fight out of him, and had made him anxious for his own safety. He had the idea of taking to his heels, but the levity of the Commissioner was reassuring, and a moment's reflection reminded him that the aid he and his friends had rendered demanded some return

At Tembe's Kraal.

in gratitude. Anderson scowled sullenly at the group, friend and foe alike.

"I must cable to Violet that her *protégé* has blossomed forth into a full-fledged land-pirate," chortled the Commissioner, as his laughter subsided.

"You have a good deal the advantage of me, sir," retorted Desborough.

"In many ways," returned the other blandly. "But let us talk business first. This is a very serious matter. You have brought an armed body of men into British territory for the purpose of attacking and plundering a friendly chief. You are liable for an extremely heavy punishment."

In an instant the culprits felt that they had been put in the dock. They were well aware of their criminality, nevertheless the accusation came to them as a shock. Desborough alone managed to preserve a calm demeanour, and he looked the Commissioner pleasantly in the face. Kip stood like a boy caught in the act of a theft, and Anderson saw himself menaced by an intangible peril. The missionary and the Commissioner were the only manifestations of danger, and he eyed them sullenly, wondering whether it were not better to grapple with his foes while he had the chance.

The Commissioner continued judicially:

"Speaking to you as the leaders of a company of raiders, I can neither bargain with you nor assist

The Ivory Raiders.

you, and in the terms I am going to offer, you will understand that I am departing from the course I ought rightly to take. You must give me your pledge that you will forthwith take your men beyond the limit of Her Majesty's territory, which is only a mile or two distant, and disband them at the earliest opportunity ; also that you will make no attack on any village either in British or Portuguese territory. If I am convinced that you are honest in your intentions, I may say that I shall not mention this matter to anyone. Are you willing to give me this pledge ? ”

The demand was followed by an uncomfortable silence, broken at last by Desborough.

“ I don't see that we can now gain anything by refusing,” he said.

“ You cannot, and I may take it that you will carry out my injunctions. Now, speaking as a private individual, I want to tell you that Cameron and I realise quite what we owe you. When you have cut yourself clear from these rascallions and can appear as decent, honest folk, we shall not avoid our obligations, but shall endeavour to repay you in any legitimate way you may think fit.”

“ We don't want your damned payment,” broke in Anderson fiercely. “ I've had enough of you, and don't want any more.”

“ Dinna be profane, man,” retorted the Scotsman.

At Tembe's Kraal.

"Not but that I like a little show of independence now and again."

"By the way," said the Commissioner abruptly, "who put you up to this job? I'll swear you never engineered it yourselves!"

Another silence ensued, broken this time by the interrogator himself.

"Well, you needn't answer. I don't want you to go back on your pals. All the same, I think I know a Zambesi Masungu when I see him. And while on that point, where the devil are they now?"

The culprits looked round in surprise. The Atonga were noisily endeavouring to make a way through the burning *débris* to the place where the ivory had been stored. Most of Tembe's followers had returned, and were celebrating the victory to which they had so faint-heartedly contributed. In groups and circles they were chanting their prowess, clapping their hands to the rhythm of the music, and flaunting blood-stained spears, most of which had been fleshed in bodies already dead. But not a Masungu was in sight!

"They are wise men," remarked Smart grimly. "I thought I recognised one or two of their faces. Now I know the man that is at the bottom of this. Gad, but you chaps have got into bad company! When you go back, tell Mr. Max Klein that I have let him off once, but that if I can get a scrap of evidence

The Ivory Raiders.

to convict him I will hang him as high as Haman. Tell him, with my compliments, that I shall make a personal matter of this. I let him off lightly the last time, but if I can incriminate him in this, I will go straight to the governor of his province. Now, do you promise that you will carry out my injunctions ? ”

The three gave their word ; Anderson without looking at the Commissioner ; Desborough as though he were accepting an invitation to dinner ; while Kip, who had somewhat recovered his nerve, expressed the keenest regret that they had not left both men to burn in the kraal.

“ You won’t say that in a week’s time, my man,” corrected the missionary. “ But I should like to speak a word or two to the three of ye. Your assistance—rendered of evil intent, maybe—by God’s grace came wondrous timeful to us, and ye’ll never find us wanting in gratitude. . . . ”

“ We are much obliged to you, Mr. Cameron,” interrupted Desborough, “ but we ask no reward for the services we have been fortunate enough to render.” He spoke quickly, to forestall Kip, who was striving to restrain his unruly tongue from making blasphemous comments.

“ There speaks your sinful pride, man,” retorted the missionary. “ Ye thought it gentleman’s work to come up here with these swashbucklers to pillage and rob and loose the devil’s game on these folk,

At Tembe's Kraal.

but ye're too mighty to take assistance from honest men."

Then he went on, more kindly: "I think sometimes there is something accursed in the atmosphere of this unhappy land. Now I'll give my word you would not rob a hen-roost in the old country! Environment is a strange thing. But by the grace of God ye've been prevented from committing a deadly evil, and ye've done a fair day's work into the bargain."

"Amen," ejaculated Kip impenitently. "We will now sing the last 'ymn."

"Don't think I'm meaning to sermonise you, my friends," added the missionary. "I know ye're not in a mood for that, but I got off the track a bit. What I want to say is, that when ye feel inclined for honest work send word to Angus Cameron, and he'll go many a day's march out of his way to do his best for you."

"And," added the Commissioner, "I am also at your service when you see that I can be of use to you in any legal manner."

"May I now have a word with you, Mr. Smart? There is no use in prolonging this interview more than necessary," said Desborough.

The Commissioner complied, and the two walked away.

"You seem to have some knowledge of my affairs, Mr. Smart?"

The Ivory Raiders.

"I have. I met your father and my cousin, Mrs. Mauprey, the night before I left England. Your father requested me to do all in my power to urge you to go home should we happen to meet you."

"I had no idea Mrs. Mauprey was your cousin," remarked Desborough. "She never mentioned your name."

"Possibly not. She thinks I'm mad. But about your affairs, Mr. Desborough. May I urge you strongly to take your father's advice?"

"You have me at such a disadvantage that it is difficult to argue on any point at the moment. I have no intention of explaining or excusing my actions. Probably my motive would sound ridiculous and absurdly inadequate to you. Still I shall not decide anything in a hurry."

"Better go home at once," said the Commissioner pessimistically. "Africa is no place for men like you. As a fact, I'm not a bit surprised to see you here at this game. Cameron is right; it is the devil of a place to provide mischief for idle hands—the climate, partly, and a too sudden release from the restraints of civilisation. I assure you, a bobby at every corner exerts an unconscious influence on an archbishop as well as on a pickpocket."

Desborough looked enviously at this strong man, who had carried through so many enterprises. He wondered if he would understand the feelings of one whose every effort had been futile, the craving

At Tembe's Kraal.

to be able to set his name to some conclusive action. He was half tempted to confide in him, but the other ran on, and the moment passed untaken.

"Your father told me he could put you into Parliament and make you secretary to some old johnnie in England. I'm not keen on politicians myself; they talk too much and do too little; but a few good men seem to take to the game. Anyway, you will find the House a less risky place than Central Africa."

The calm assumption that he could encompass no good work of his own initiative galled the young man to the bone. Yet in his position he could say but little in favour of himself. In place he turned the conversation. "Tell me about Violet Mauprey," he said.

Smart looked at him curiously. Then a gleam of remembrance shot into his mind. "You were engaged to her, were you not?"

"I was," replied Desborough stiffly.

"Oh, don't get scotty! Of course I should have remembered at once, but the fact is, Vi keeps her affairs pretty close, and I got only a side wind. She's well enough. By the way, she is going to help your father in his election contest. He is fighting to keep your place warm, you know."

At this Desborough felt the sharpest twinge of home-sickness he had ever known. Would his

The Ivory Raiders.

pride permit him to return, he wondered, after this last and heaviest fall? Smart was scrutinising him narrowly, so, with an effort, he resumed his customary air of cheerfulness.

"I can't imagine my father fighting an election," he said. "Politics were never in his line."

"Oh, he's doing it, and he's doing it well, you may be sure. Look here, Mr. Desborough, I'm not addicted to impertinent curiosity, as a rule, but was it a great blow to you when your engagement ended?"

It was now Bob's turn to eye the Commissioner.

"Of course it was a shock at the time," he responded slowly and not very truthfully. "But I believe now that your cousin was wise in what she did."

"Gad, she's wise enough! I was engaged to her once myself, but she thought better of it. If you will excuse my saying so, you are no more suited to her than I was. She is one of those women that want handling by a man a good deal older than herself."

Desborough gave a wry smile, and felt exceedingly youthful.

"Your father seemed to set a good deal of value on her opinion," added the other.

"It's not a common failing of his," commented Bob, wondering whether the Commissioner meant to imply more than he had said; but he could

At Tembe's Kraal.

draw no conclusions from the inscrutable face before him.

An awkward pause followed; then Smart held out his hand.

"Perhaps we had better be going our ways. My control ceases at that watershed yonder. I know I can rely upon you to keep your word. Perhaps we may meet again on a better footing. Let me know if I can do anything for you or your friends. I can't pretend to be sympathetic with you now, though I know, to my cost, that an insidious belief obtains that the laws of God and man become optional once the last settlement is passed. I am returning to England directly I have settled this job, which should not take long, as Tembe is anxious enough to get rid of the ivory, though I expect a lot is spoiled by the fire. If you take my advice we shall possibly meet on the steamer. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Desborough, and the Commissioner did not guess what an effort it cost him to say no more.

CHAPTER XV.

CROSSING THE BORDER.

THE missionary had returned to the wounded. Kip and Anderson, finding the atmosphere of the kraals distasteful, had strolled back to the camp, and Desborough followed them slowly, trying to sort out his feelings. The past hour had been the most pregnant of his life. It had witnessed the climax and demolition of hopes and fears, and it had brought to him a crop of fresh emotions: the thrill and the horror of warfare and the humiliation of being denounced as a filibuster by a man whom, in different circumstances, he would have greeted as a friend. The hour had wiped all plans from his slate, and he was now at liberty to start again as he willed. Truly it was a relief to him that the raid had failed, and that failure was due to no act of disloyalty towards their partners at Orobo. But if the loss of the ivory meant nothing to him, it meant much to his comrades; still he knew that secretly they also were relieved at the unexpected termination of the enterprise, though they would assuredly grumble at it with marked ability. He paused, and looked at the devastation

Crossing the Border.

before him, wondering how he would feel if this carnage had been more directly the outcome of their plans, and with dismay he remembered how flippantly he and his companions had accepted the leadership of such an undertaking.

A hot glow of resentment against the promoters of the expedition swept through him. It was irrational, he knew, for Max would have done the dirty work himself without a twinge of conscience had he been unknown in the district; but the feeling of dislike and distrust, kindled before leaving Orobo Grande, had since gone on smouldering until it was likely to be fanned into flame by sheer mortification.

And what was to be his next move? Was he to go home like a dog with its tail between its legs—a man of no account, a receiver of kicks, the author of a succession of failures? The thought was as bitter to him as myrrh. Yet what adventure was likely to arise that might serve to restore his self-respect? Might he not more easily plunge into a fresh disaster? At the camp he found his companions disconsolately tearing cold tinned beef to pieces with their fingers, and munching it with ship's biscuit. The dejection of their attitude and the sordidness of the meal struck a new note of disgust. Was he not in the same boat with them, and could he flatter himself that he cut a finer figure. His mind was beset with interrogations.

The Ivory Raiders.

Was it worth while trying to accomplish anything in this disheartening country? Was it not better to acknowledge himself beaten, and to go home?

"Bilked!" growled Kip, tearing at the meat. "Bilked by a Bond Street toff and a blarsted missionary! We'd better go 'ome and hire ourselves out to do the washin'!"

Desborough managed to disguise his despondency.

"We struck a bad patch that time, didn't we?" he said.

"Aye," replied Anderson. "You tumbled to what these chaps were sooner than we did. Smart seemed to know you. What did he mean by calling you an M.P.?"

"He knew my father," responded Desborough carelessly. "He's something of the kind."

"Strike me!" exclaimed Kip, "there's somethin' about that Smart that makes a chap feel small! I've made some fair old messes in my time, but I don't s'pose I ever made such a bloomin' error as mistakin' 'im for an ivory snatcher! And that there missionary, too! Gawd, what a compliment 'e did 'ave paid 'im!"

"And what about Max and Raphael?" queried Anderson. "They'll chuck epileptic fits when they hear Smart has collared the ivory."

"Max can chuck what he likes," replied Desborough wearily. "Personally I don't feel inclined

Crossing the Border.

to go near him. It can do no good, and he would get on my nerves. Let's have something to eat, and cross over to Portuguese territory. We'll feel easier when we have made our word good to Smart."

"P'raps we'd better! 'E might come back and change his mind," said Kip. "I do like his style. We save him from the fiery furnace, and 'e says: 'Thank you, my men; and if you get out of my country sharp, we'll say no more about it.'"

"I never dreamed we was likely to come across that cove," said Anderson. "I'd have made Max take on the job himself if I'd known."

"I suppose," said Kip, "'e might have had us all shot, with that black-whiskered missionary prayin' on 'is knees for our sinful souls. Say, let's get out of this."

They resumed their meal, discussing the kaleidoscopic happenings of the morning. Seated in a circle, a hundred yards distant, the Masungus were strenuously eating and talking.

The knowledge that their assistance had merely effected the rescue of the redoubtable Commissioner had come to them as a dismal surprise. They had slunk away like jackals before an uncaged and hungry lion, without waiting for thanks. But once out of range of the dread eyeglass, they puffed and swelled with arrogance. Every man of them

The Ivory Raiders.

claimed an especial distinction for valour ; and as none listened to his neighbour, the claims were not disputed. But the bombastic tone was quickly succeeded by one of dissatisfaction. They had long cherished the thought of an unchecked loot of Tembe's country, by way of reward for their good conduct and restraint when on the march. Now they had fought and won, and what return would their leaders make them ? That question must be settled, they agreed. But into the midst of their consultation came Juão to say that the camp was to be moved beyond the watershed. The Masungus had no objection to this ; it would place them beyond the machinations of that interfering Smart ; but once there, the white men must come to terms with them.

The path wound by the southernmost part of Tembe's village. As they passed they heard wailings and sounds of lamentation. Pathetic figures bowed over their dead and their ruined homes. Two thin grey pillars of smoke rose from the ashes of the burnt kraals, and about Tembe's a cluster of busy figures were seen working under the direction of the Commissioner. On reaching a ridge at the opposite side of the valley, the trio turned and took a last look at the scene of desolation ; then without a word they resumed their march. This work had come nearer to being placed to their own account than they cared to think of. Half an hour's march

Crossing the Border.

brought them to the top of the watershed. They had now made good their word to the Commissioner : before them stretched Portuguese territory ; behind was British.

" We've taken the Order of the Boot fair enough this time," remarked Kip. The others did not respond, for they felt the degradation keenly. On they went, glad to place a few miles between themselves and that stricken valley. The country was open and pleasant, but their spirits were fluttering around zero. Only one effort was made at conversation, and that by Anderson.

" I can't make out what's come over that boy Jim," he said. " He don't seem to be as light-hearted as he used to. He's got something on his mind. I've promised him a licking if he don't tell me, and my wore-out pair of breeches if he will, but it won't make him talk."

" There ain't no bloomin' reason why 'e should be light-'earted, as I can see," quoth Kip, and the conversation fell for want of sympathy.

They must have trudged ten miles before they came to a spot eminently suited for camping, whereat, by mutual consent, they halted. In order to secure some measure of privacy, Desborough told the carriers to pitch the tent.

" Somehow I feel as if I can't even look them Masungus in the face to-day," said David, as they sought its shelter. " I don't think a drink will

The Ivory Raiders.

do any of us any harm. Jim, boy, get some water."

They had among their stores two bottles of whisky, which had been hoarded as "medical comforts." It was agreed that the moment had arrived when the stimulant became a necessity rather than a luxury. Jim brought the water. With one of his rare outbreaks of familiarity, Anderson turned to him.

"The game's up, Jim; we're beat again. Your poor old master don't get no luck. . . . Don't put too much water, Jim."

To his amazement Jim set down the water-gourd and bolted, but before his master had delivered his usual conjectures as to the boy's ancestry he returned, with the air of one who steels himself for an agonising visit to the dentist.

"Oh, boss, me tell you somet'ing. You no hit me very hard?"

Anderson looked at him with encouragement. "What's up, Jim?" he asked.

The boy gave a gasp of trepidation, then spoke heroically.

"Me tell you, senhor; it no bad t'ing you no get ivory. Max and Raphael both damn bad men. No more good than hyena."

"*Senhores* Max and Raphael," corrected Anderson. He could not tolerate familiarity on the part

Crossing the Border.

of a black man even towards those whom he had no cause to love.

"Senhores Max and Raphael," repeated Jim meekly. "Well, 'pose you catch ivory, then S'hor Max mean to do——" The boy gazed vacantly around the tent for a word till he remembered an old tag. "S'hor Max mean to do you one shot in the eye."

Three pairs of eyes gazed wonderingly on Jim. Then Anderson's right hand shot out and fixed itself on the boy's curly pate.

"Out with it, you black ragamuffin! What do you mean?"

And Jim made a clean breast of it.

"Oh, s'hor! You leave go my hair! Well, you send me back to Zambesi, give *carta* (letter) to engineer *Crocodile*. You 'member dat? An' me wait in milho-field all day, an' when night come get very hungry. My woman, she servant S'hor Raphael—wash clo's an' bake bread. Well, me go see her to get food."

"And took the letters with you?" shouted Kip frantically. In his excitement he forgot Mr. Sanderson's acknowledgment.

"No fears, senhor!" responded Jim virtuously. "S'hor Raphael, him gone 'way. My woman, she say me big fool go wi' you, 'cause S'hor Max and Raphael make us all die goin' down Chindi way, an' get back him money."

The Ivory Raiders.

"Don't be afraid to speak, Jim," said Desborough quietly. "Tell us how she knew, and all about it."

More at his ease, the boy continued: "You 'member time you make big 'greement? Well, S'hor Max, him come 'way an' make talk wi' S'hor Raphael."

The three assented. They recollected every movement of that fateful night.

"Good. My woman, she go into room—S'hor Raphael—after he go out, to take lil food for me. All sudden S'hor Raphael come back, an' she hide mighty quick under blankets by wall. Then S'hor Max, him come, an' they have big talk, an' she un'stan' every word, 'cause she speak Portuguese plenty. She listen dat night, and 'nother night after, outside window.

"S'hor Raphael say you all same thieves, you ask too much money, an' S'hor Max laugh an' say no need pay 'cause Chutika—him mighty bad nigger—him guide you to Chindi 'cross bad place where no water t'ree, four, five, or more days. Den, in middle, Chutika him run 'way to where him know find water-hole, an' you—get lost an' die. Sure certain that, 'cause you no know way, and Chutika follow an' get money and papers. S'hor Raphael, him say, 'Good 'nuff,' an' both go back make 'greement."

His hearers glanced at each other nervously,

Crossing the Border.

fearful of what they might learn next. Truly it was a day of enlightenment. But Desborough thought he detected a weakness in the boy's story.

"Say, Jim, if you knew this all along, why you no tell us sooner?"

And Anderson added, "Aye, Jim, tell us that."

It was the question the boy dreaded. He hung his head, but answered manfully:

"If me tell you first, senhor, you sure certain go back an' make fire-brimstone row with S'hor Max, an' S'hor Max make Orobo very hot shop for me. So me t'ink"—there was a desperate earnestness in his voice—"go along with you an' earn 'nuff wages buy 'nother wife. Den after you take Tembe's ivory me tell you everyt'ing, an' you carry ivory down to lake an' sell to English people. Bes' for you, bes' for me, bes' everybody. An' Senhor Max never know me tell 'bout him."

"It seems," said Bob, "somebody else besides the Almighty has had the ordering of our lives during the past month. We cut a pretty small figure in all this, David."

"Strewth!" exclaimed Kip, looking at the boy almost in admiration. "An' you brought the whole bloomin' caravan up 'ere so as you could buy yer-self another woman? Love-a-duck! You knows your own mind, young fellow."

The Ivory Raiders.

Anderson sprang to his feet.

"I'll give you some of *my* mind, Master Jim, and some of my strap, too."

He undid his belt as he seized the boy by the arm. Two strokes cut viciously across the bare, coffee-coloured shoulders; a third was in the air, when the others intervened.

"That's enough, old man," said Desborough. "It's no good licking him. He had the decency to tell us at last, which is perhaps more than one in a hundred of his kind would have done."

Anderson relaxed his grip, gave a couple of undecided strokes, then shoved the culprit from the tent. He was glad to let the boy off lightly, since he felt no personal animosity towards him, though etiquette demanded that a servant should be punished adequately by his master, and he was prepared to be punctilious.

For the moment the egoism of Jim's behaviour had distracted their thoughts from his disclosure, but now its import came slowly home to them. Certainly they had anticipated the likelihood of double-dealing, but nothing so dastardly as this. Anderson took a deep drink, and muttered imprecations deeper still. Desborough fumbled with his iron mug, and seemed unable to collect his thoughts. Strangely enough, Kip displayed the least emotion. Throughout he had held their

Crossing the Border.

partners at Orobo in a meaner estimation than had his companions, and after one or two withering remarks he buried his chin in his hands and became lost in a fit of frowning abstraction.

CHAPTER XVI.

KIP'S PLAN.

It was still scarcely noon, but the swift movement of events, and the poignant experiences of the morning, had made the discomfited raiders heedless of time. Had he been asked, Desborough would have said that a week had passed since he had scouted with Binzi at the Arab camp, and no year of his life had hitherto been half as eventful. At first the boy's disclosure aroused in him no feeling of resentment. It was in harmony with the grotesque pattern into which fate was wantonly weaving their affairs, and he felt too tired and bewildered to appreciate the relative importance of things. All that he realised was that they were derelicts, men to be brushed aside by this one, betrayed and despised by that. But the mood did not last for long. A draught of the potent spirit stirred the blood in his veins and set his brain working. Then was he fired by a lust for vengeance. Wrathfully he pieced together the conspiracy. It was startling in its simplicity and completeness. If he and his comrades had been successful in the raid they were to be lured into a waterless desert

Kip's Plan.

which stretched conveniently beyond Max's *rendez-vous*, and there left to perish. He had learned sufficient bushmanship to know how easily this might be accomplished when men were dependent on guides. With exceptional luck they might have blundered through, but even then Max could have snapped his fingers at them, and blamed the "faithless niggers." That country was unknown to the Masungus, so there was little chance that these men could have given a timely warning. Indeed, it was quite possible, he reasoned, that such a fate might have awaited them, even after the raid had failed, but for Jim's discovery. For if, in their ignorance, they had decided to rejoin Max at his village, he might have found it a safe method of embarrassing himself of inconvenient accomplices. As he pondered on these contingencies, Bob's desire for revenge glowed more fiercely, and he vowed not to leave the country before he was even with Max and Raphael.

Here his attention was attracted to Anderson. He, like the others, had been brooding over this turn of affairs, but now he was showing signs of restlessness. Bob eyed him keenly, for when deeply stirred he knew the other capable of strange moods and passions. Suddenly Anderson rose and made as though he were going to step right through the canvas of the tent. His face was flushed, and there was a dangerous expression in his eyes.



The Ivory Raiders.

"I'll twist his head off! Holy Mother, I'll wring his neck!" he muttered

"Sit down, David. Don't be a fool," snapped Desborough hysterically. He had had as much excitement as he could stand that day. But his comrade took no notice of him.

"I'll march back till I drop, so help me God, and wring his neck the moment I get there."

The blood had risen into his head, and he worked his arms to expand his lungs, for there seemed to be no air. Suddenly he flung open the end of the tent and stood in the gap.

"Stop him, Kip," cried Desborough, "he's going to raise Cain. You understand him best."

Outside, the Masungus had renewed their feverish discussion on the situation. They were hungry for loot, pillage, and general debauchery, and were clamorously demanding of Binzi to be unleashed at prey of one kind or another. But the figure that came to the entrance of the tent made them lower their tones and pause in alarm.

Anderson stood as if seeking some cyclopean weapon before he cast himself upon the assembly. His eyes roved from one group to the next, and the men cowered before him, stealthily gripping their rifles. Then a peculiar incident occurred. Kip came forth and confronted him.

He displayed no symptom of fear, only irritability. He had a ludicrous resemblance to a shrew about

Kip's Plan.

to scold a loutish, drunken husband. Planting himself squarely in front of his comrade, one arm akimbo, the other pointing a threatening forefinger, he began to chide in a high-pitched voice.

The distracted man did not seem to hear the words; it looked, for one tragic moment, as if he would unconsciously pick the speaker up and fling him at the onlookers, but Kip went on imperturbably:

"Why can't you keep your measly temper in? What d'yer want to stand 'ere, ravin' like an ord'nary drunken nigger, for? Wasn't the lesson you got at Elephant Creek good enough? 'Cause I'll be 'anged if I stir a finger to save your skin a second time."

Either the reference to the scene, or the locality cut through to David's understanding, and he shivered slightly. But Kip ran on with taunts which stung and bit like a knotted lash, until his victim fairly writhed beneath them. The danger was averted, and Desborough took his arm and pulled the sobered man back into the tent.

Now the Masungus were silent with wonder. This, the smallest of their leaders, who had sat up all night grey with fear because of the proximity of two gorged lions, had, unaided, quelled the madness of one whom they regarded as more formidable than any beast of the forest.

Anderson sat down shamefacedly.

"Sorry, boys. I just seemed to see red. You're

The Ivory Raiders.

a plucky little devil, Kip. It's a mercy I didn't lay hands on you. When I'm taken like that, I don't know what I'm doing."

Kip made no response. As though nothing unseemly had happened, he drifted back into his cogitations. The others helped themselves to whisky.

"Here's eternal fire and torment to those two scoundrels," grunted Anderson, and Desborough, nodding acquiescence, drank the toast.

"Aren't you drinking, Kip?" asked Desborough, and getting no reply he pushed a mug into the other's hands.

"What, whisky?" exclaimed Kip, in some surprise, then absent-mindedly he set the cup on the table untasted.

"He's goin' off his head," whispered Anderson. "This here day is goin' to be too much for the bloomin' lot of us!"

To their dismay Kip began to chuckle, not at their conjectures, but at his own conclusions.

"Blest if it isn't a safer game than the other," he exclaimed, "and more profitable. I wonder why we never thought of it before."

"What game?" queried Desborough, "I'm afraid my nerves are weakening. I don't want to play games. I only want to sit here and drink whisky."

Without a trace of care, Kip raised his cup and

Kip's Plan.

drank to the others, who watched his movements wonderingly.

"You think this 'ere job's played out," he remarked. "That we've only got left to go back to Mr. Max and say, 'Please, sir, we're sorry we was too late for the ivory, but it wasn't our fault, and don't be too 'ard on us.'"

"I'm going back to twist his neck," said Anderson moodily.

"Oh no, you won't, my son—'e's too valuable for that," replied Kip. "But we'll go back all the same to this rendyvoo of his and say, 'I'll trouble you for them six thousand quid you owe us, and if you'll 'and 'em over quick we won't say nothing about yer dirty tricks.'" He laughed triumphantly, then seeing the others merely listened as though to humour him, he continued with rising anger :

"You think I'm goin' dotty, don't you? It's lucky for you, 'owever, one of us 'as got a 'ead on his shoulders, or we might sit 'ere and take all the dirt that's chucked at us. Can't you see we've got Max and Raphael on toast, and that they've got to give us what we ask them? If they refuse we just take off our hats and wish 'em good mornin', and that agreement passes to the British consul. It would be five years apiece for 'em, if I know anything, directly Mr. Smart gets 'old of it."

"And how many years should we get?" asked Desborough sarcastically.

The Ivory Raiders.

"None at all, Mr. Clever. I've thought all that out." He leant forward and earnestly debated his point. "Even if the worst was to come to the worst, Smart's done with us. 'E's one of your 'igh an' mighty sort, but 'e don't bear no malice. We've kep' our word, and 'e'd sooner bust himself than land us in the law-courts. But 'e's death and damnation on Max Klein, and Max has been caught at the game before. We might 'ave to lay up in our country 'ouses for a bit, but what chance would him and Raphael 'ave once Smart gets 'old of that little bit o' paper? No, sirree, Max an' Raphael will pay. They won't like it. It'll be as bad as 'ydrophobia to 'em, but they'll stump up—leave that to me!"

"He'd have us all shot sooner than pay," growled Anderson. "My way's best. Go down and twist their necks."

"Dry up! You're all for brute force, you hulk!" retorted Kip loftily. "This is a bloomin' matter of diplomacy. They can't touch a 'air of our 'eads. Can't you see? They've got to keep us alive to get back that agreement. If they shoot us they're ruined and they'll find it isn't worth it."

Already, with the prospect of a new campaign, the clouds of their despondency were lifting. Desborough noted that the faces of his comrades had brightened with eagerness. Cameron might offer to put them in the way of steady, profitable

Kip's Plan.

work ; even Smart, in time, might find them a lucrative position, but there was not the slightest chance of their good offices being accepted. Years of desultory gold-seeking, hunting, and the adoption of any hazardous method of earning a livelihood had sapped whatever industry these men might originally have possessed. But this new adventure was reckless enough to appeal to their uncurbed fancies, and Bob, with a thrill of disquiet, realised that his inclinations were forming in the same direction.

"Smart told me," he remarked, "that he was returning to England directly he had fixed up about the ivory. That should bring him down to Chindi within the next two months. This fact may help to make Mr. Max sit up."

"It'll clinch it!" said Kip excitedly. "It will be as good as the ace of trumps."

They thought hard. Unpractical as the scheme appeared they could not put their fingers on the weak link. The agreement had never been taken quite seriously by the other two ; they had preferred to trust their interest to the strength of their arms rather than to a document. Certainly, when Kip had sent the paper to Chindi, it had seemed a likely enough agent, should they stand in need of a post-mortem vengeance, but it had never occurred to them to use it as an instrument of extortion. At all risks they had intended to carry through their side

The Ivory Raiders.

of the contract as honourably as the nature of the transaction would permit. But now that they had evidence that their partners had callously planned treachery from the first, the thought of reprisal roused them to enthusiasm. Yet it was going to be no half-holiday escapade. Max and Raphael, backed by a horde of Arab desperadoes, would be awaiting them at Chutika, and to beard them in their stronghold on the strength of two signatures seemed a forlorn hope even to these forsaken outcasts.

Still Kip's confidence was infectious, though the others, wishful to test the tenacity of the plan, argued against him.

"The odds are too great," objected Anderson. "If they fought they have the Arabs with them, and we could not rely on the Masungus siding with us. Just wait a bit, and we'll get even with them some other way."

"You make me tired," replied Kip. "Fightin' is just the sinful luxury they can't afford. If we're killed, then they're done for. The consul gets the paper, and they'll 'ave to hook it pretty sharp to save their bodies from gaol. Now which are they likest to do—sacrifice their plantations, steamers, an' Gawd knows what devilments they may be in besides, or pay up a humble five or six thousand quid between 'em? Why, any fool can see they'll pay. Besides, killing white people with

Kip's Plan.

others looking on isn't a safe game, even at a place like Chutika."

"But will they believe us about the agreement being in Chindi?" objected Desborough. "They may imagine we have it on us, and make an attempt to search us and our traps. They'll want proof of that."

"An' we've got Johnnie Saunderson's letter to convince 'em," answered Kip. "By a pretty stroke of luck it don't say who the packet was sent to. Why, strike me dumb!" he added, in a moment of exaltation, "we can say we sent it straight to the consul 'imself, to be delivered to no one except one of our selves, and to be opened by 'im in the event of our not returnin' within a certain time."

"There's one thing they might do," suggested Desborough. "They might take us prisoners and go down to Chindi, and find out where the packet lies, invent some yarn and buy or steal it. Then where are we?"

But Kip was radiant.

"Not an earthly chance of their trying, my son. It would be too much like walkin' into the teeth of the trap, especially if Smart is about. And we'd have a word to say about bein' taken prisoners so long as we've got our shootin' irons handy. No; they are in the mud, and they'll find it out. It's 'Hand over the cash, or we'll say good-mornin,' and we can send a telegram the first place we

The Ivory Raiders.

touches that will start the machinery going. Then we can foot it back through to Mashonaland, where there's plenty more like us to get lost amongst."

Desborough winced; he had had his fill of that kind of life, and did not want to prolong his exile, unless with a definite object. But Max and Raphael must be brought to book, and it would not answer to spare any pains in doing so. Kip's plan appeared more and more feasible as they investigated it. Bob was troubled with a fine pagan thirst for vengeance, and it was impossible to picture one more befitting or complete. He had thought of physical violence, but with such volcanic natures as Max and Anderson in opposition the outcome could not be clearly foreseen. Yet if Max proved obdurate and defied them, he put the question to himself, what then? After all, it would only mean an enforced exile till the affair had blown over, and possibly the association of their names with a case that would cause talk for a few days. Perhaps, he thought grimly, it might serve to satisfy his father that at last he was becoming a man of some importance!

But here his reasoning advanced a strong argument in favour of Kip's scheme. He, Robert Desborough, was a young man, unattached either by predilection or business interest to any particular spot on the earth for the next year or so, and his complicity, together with that of his companions, had

Kip's Plan.

been practically condoned by the action of the commissioner. Into the bargain, he could show a reasonably clean past. And yet, in the event of Smart proceeding against the two chief conspirators, he was considering the advisability of losing himself until the affair had blown over. On the other side, Max and Raphael were anchored to Orobo by business concerns that were at once prosperous and in all likelihood nefarious. A sudden departure would mean ruin and exposure. Max had already been caught red-handed on a previous attempt to raid the ivory; Raphael's appearance was enough to hang him, in the eyes of any judge; while the previous history of both was deplorable. Neither man would dare to face a tribunal.

"When that considerin' cap of yours is fair wore out by the mental strain, pr'aps you'll tell us what you think of the game, Mr. Solomon," said Kip.

"It's worth trying," said Bob, "if we don't discover any flaw in the reasoning."

"There ain't no flaw," replied Kip. When the little man had decided upon a course of action, his faith in his own good judgment was magnificent.

"Of course, you know," continued Desborough, "the job is a bit close to blackmail, but I can't think of a better way of making these two scoundrels grovel."

"Blackmail!" repeated Kip scornfully. "That shows you've never 'ad no business education."

The Ivory Raiders.

Look 'ere: I come into your office in a shiny 'at. You sits at a desk with a gardenia in your button-'ole. I say to you, 'Now, 'ow much are you givin' for this little bit o' paper?' an' you say to me, 'Go 'ome and fry your face!' 'Very well,' says I, 'I'll just take a cab across to Mr. Smart's office—what did you say, five thousand? Make it six. Thank you. I don't think a receipt will be necessary. Good morning!' That's business, my son, anywhere."

Desborough laughed. He had known transactions among speculators on the gold-fields in comparison with which their own little affair seemed moral! And these had not ended in the law-courts. Libations of champagne had flowed in their honour at the nearest saloon. "Yes," he replied sarcastically, "we are graduating as financiers, though the only thing that makes me sweet on this job is, that the shooting is as likely as not to begin before Max and Raphael realise the virtue in keeping us alive and whole. And that gives some dignity to the game, anyway."

"Well," said Kip, "'ands up for those in favour of sticking up Max and Raphael."

Bob looked at Anderson, "I believe I'm mad," he said, and put up his hand.

"I'd sooner break his head, but I dare say you're right," and a third hand went up in the air.

And thus, barely disentangled from one hazard,

Kip's Plan.

they pledged themselves light-heartedly to a second—as dangerous as, though perhaps more venial than, the first. All three were spurred on by a craving for revenge: one considered that his down-trodden self-respect would be revived thereby (though it was really his vanity that was in trouble), and the others, actuated by the highest instinct of the gambler, were willing to stake their persons against the chance of a big coup.

“What seems difficult to understand now is how Max and Raphael ever came to sign the paper,” said Anderson after a pause.

“It took 'em by surprise,” explained Kip. “Max fair had a bee in his bonnet over gettin' that ivory, and 'e wasn't goin' to let the chance go by through bein' afraid of signing his name. You remember old Raphael jibbed until Max pressed 'im.”

“I've often noticed,” remarked Desborough, “how men, the least to be trusted themselves, are often the readiest to trust other people. Max knew that we would never dream of using that paper if he played straight, and of course he never reckoned on our finding out about his treachery. Jim was the bit of sand that threw his machinery out of gear. And I don't suppose Max is even aware of Jim's existence. By the way, I suppose we are right in believing the boy implicitly? Isn't it a bit risky, judging men on a nigger's unsupported word?”

The Ivory Raiders.

"I believe him," said Anderson. "He has nothing to gain by lying."

"I feel it in my bones that it's true," added Kip. "We all of us felt they was up to some game. Rot 'em!"

"Gad!" laughed Desborough. "It will be a tempestuous meeting. Max will be mad enough when he knows that Smart has the ivory, but he will go clean off his head when we ask him to pay up. If once we get flurried, or lose our heads, we shall be lost."

"You leave that to me," said Kip. "I'll do the talking. Our luck's only just beginning, I can tell you!"

Desborough looked at Kip mischievously. It was some time since the little man had been drawn on the subject of his fiancée's letter.

"I don't know if you still set any store on that letter as a mascot, Kip? It seems to me to bring about the thinnest kind of luck I have ever struck. Or is it that you've broken your word, and have been reading it on the sly?"

Kip answered in all seriousness; "I 'aven't even fingered the envelope, mate, I'll give you my word. But just you wait a bit, it's goin' to see us through this job all right. Say, those chaps are getting a bit noisy outside."

From the clamour which rose and fell, it was evident that a storm was brewing. The unexpected

Kip's Plan.

appearance of Anderson, a little while back, had intimidated the Masungus for the moment ; but his easy subjugation by the diminutive Kip had discounted their fear of him. Out blazed their resentment again like a rick afire. They had been cajoled, treated as children, only to be cheated out of their booty at the last moment. They had been reduced to the rank of Kaffirs . . . out came all the old complaints with quite a piquant freshness after their long disuse. And who were these usurpers ? One was afraid of a lion ; the biggest had been cowed by the smallest, and the third was not more than a boy ! Binzi was fiercely instructed to go to them and say that unless the Masungus were at once led against some neighbouring tribe and given ample scope for plunder, they would revolt.

But the errand was repugnant to the *capitão*. He admitted that, individually, his masters had their weaknesses, yet he had failed to observe that a proper fear of his brethren was among them ; so he moved that here was a case favourable to the introduction of a new mouth-piece, as his own influence had been staled by over-use. This rebuff added straw to the flame, and it seemed as if the angry mob would find a victim in their chief. At this moment, however, Desborough strolled amiably into their midst and asked what the fun was about.

The Ivory Raiders.

A grudge the Masungus had against the white men was that they never behaved at critical junctures as might be anticipated. Completely taken by surprise, the fury of the malcontents evaporated, and in a minute Desborough found himself surrounded by eager, voluble men who besought him to take pity on their disappointment.

After a lively contention he made them an offer which pleased him greatly by reason of its audacity. He explained that his comrades and himself intended to obtain their reward from Max and Raphael, and offered to go bail that the rest of the caravan should receive payment also, with a bonus into the bargain as good conduct money, stipulating only that they should continue as before until they were dismissed. It would not add much to the contest, he reasoned to himself, to extract this additional amount which, after all, was not a great one. Men, in that country of undisciplined labour and small requirements, were hired for the value of a few shillings a month and paid in kind. Since the failure of the raid the Masungus had given up any hope of payment from Max or Raphael, so the proposal took them by surprise. They were amazed at the temerity of their leaders, yet they placed great faith in them; so they closed with the offer after an hour's debate. Not only did they stand a chance of getting their pay, but they remembered that it was convenient to travel from Chutika to Orobo by way of a fat and

Kip's Plan.

populous district, wherein any shortage of the exchequer might be rectified. On one point Desborough insisted : no man was to desert the caravan before they arrived at Chutika ; for if the bad news once reached Max, that astute person would probably take himself conveniently out of the way of any possible embarrassment.

But one man in the caravan was seriously alarmed at the turn of affairs, and that was Jim, their usually optimistic, cocoa-tinted Mercury. Like Max, he had counted upon a successful raid, after which he intended to disclose the plot against his master. To his native mind, the logical consequences would have been that the white men took their booty to another market, far distant from the baneful influence of Jew or Dutchman. In such a transaction Jim had hoped to feather his nest very snugly.

Now all was changed for the worse. Loyalty to Anderson (and the boy was unfalteringly loyal) had made him confess everything, with these dire results, and the current of his machinations was driving him back on the very rocks he sought to avoid. At first he decided to abstract some goods from the stores in payment of his wages and virtues, and to strike out a line of his own ; but, apart from antipathy to desertion, this scheme lacked feasibility. He could not travel many days without resorting to a village in order to procure food ; and the first

The Ivory Raiders.

natives he encountered would plunder him ; so he concluded that this must be one of the occasions he had heard of, when honesty becomes the best policy, and he threw in his lot with his master.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE VIGIL.

SOME weeks after the caravan left Orobo Grande, Max began preparations for the performance of his share of the bargain. Raphael had already intercepted the Arab caravan, and diverted their course to Chutika, a place they knew intimately through previous dealings with the two traders. There they awaited the coming of the ivory. During these weeks of inaction the partners had held many anxious conversations, but now the talking-time was past; and if everything had gone favourably, the raiders might return to Chutika with the booty in a week, and it was essential to be there before them. From private sources Max learned that the expedition had made a series of rapid and orderly marches until they passed beyond his ken; also that the Masungus were being kept severely in hand. This, though it astonished him, was gratifying, for he foresaw that men who could discipline such a lawless gang of cut-throats would be likely to make short work of Tembe and his people.

The Dutchman made provision for the trip on a more lavish scale than he had employed when

The Ivory Raiders.

despatching his agents. He showed solicitude for the least detail, lest he should find himself in the desert lacking some accustomed comfort. Two companies, each comprised of twelve sturdy niggers, were selected to carry the *machillas* in which Raphael and he purposed to travel, for neither had any thought of going afoot—an exercise they despised. A regiment of porters was marshalled to convey the luggage, food, wines, and camp equipment. Kalua, the gaily dressed, and her retinue, made a bustle with the cooking gear, the girl finding time, nevertheless, to pack her master's personal belongings. Everything went with a swing, and the third morning saw the travellers ready for the road.

On the evening prior to their departure, Max called on the Commandant and his staff to take leave ceremoniously. He gave out that he was going to his up-country station, to consider the expediency of establishing a still more advanced centre of traffic, and that Senhor Raphael had graciously consented to accompany him. The announcement of his departure was news to nobody, though the officer assumed a courteous look of surprise on hearing it. Max added that the health of his friend and himself was indifferent; and that a few weeks in a higher altitude was desirable; whereat the Commandant and officials suppressed their smiles—they were a civil people at Orobo in those days—and trusted that their dear comrades

The Vigil.

would profit by the change of air. Several bottles of sweet champagne of an uncertain date were opened, and speeches made in which Max and Raphael figured as pioneers of civilisation and progress. These were followed by an affectionate farewell that demanded three rounds of embraces, after which they separated with expressions of undying admiration for each other.

Immediately after crossing the river the two Europeans retired to their *machillas*, and incidentally it may be mentioned, neither set foot upon the path, except at halting-places, until they reached their destination. Kalua ran in Max's *cortège*. She carried a large felt-covered bottle containing a pleasant drink, and as she ran she laughed and prattled with the other girls and children. Now and again the Dutchman called to her, when she would join him, administer to his wants and run beside the *machilla* till he was tired of her company; then she would drop back to the rear, still laughing and chattering. To her life was a pleasant matter, and not the least cheering part of it was a trip of this sort.

Max left Orobo in a fine humour with himself. Everything appeared to be going uncommonly well. He had had no tidings of the expedition for many weeks; but this he considered reassuring. He argued thus: Should the raiders have failed—that is, should they have attacked and been defeated—he

The Ivory Raiders.

would certainly have received word before leaving Orobo, since the adventurers, being short of provisions, would of necessity have fallen back on Pormula, whence the news would have travelled swiftly. On the other hand, if things had gone favourably and the ivory had been secured, Max could expect to hear nothing. Tembe would surely retreat to the north-west, where he would find people akin to himself who would offer him hospitality; and the victors would proceed to Chutika with all speed. As the country between these two points was very sparsely populated, news was unlikely to precede them. With this reasoning Raphael concurred; indeed, that gentleman had coaxed himself into a mood approaching optimism.

The three Englishmen would bring the ivory to Chutika—he now felt convinced on that score—and Raphael and himself would make a great parade of weighing every tusk. Then they would hand over the money, splitting a bottle of wine for luck. The bulk would be paid by cheque, negotiable at Chindi, and, unless they could back out of it, the six hundred pounds which Desborough had stipulated upon, in cash and notes. Max cursed Desborough inwardly a dozen times, for he had collected and brought the money sorely against his inclinations. Yes, he reflected, paying so large a sum in cash was regrettable . . . it might even be a complete loss . . . but considering what they stood to win they

The Vigil.

could afford it. Chutika must use every endeavour to recover it. He must track the men down to their—he paused for a word. In fact, it should be Chutika's reward—or half the money should—the whole was too much. It would be necessary to pay him well to buy his silence, so he might as well take the risk. If he did not recover the money he would get no pay. If he got no pay he could not make a disturbance, because he would be in no position to bring proof of a conspiracy. For that matter he could not do so in any case, as he was too implicated himself. Yes, half the money was too much, a quarter would be handsome remuneration.

But supposing these Englishmen should choose another route or, being warned of the state of the country, select their own guides? This thought gave Max little uneasiness. It was too improbable. Beyond question they would take the quickest road to Chindi to present their cheques and clear out of the country, and they had not the slightest reason to suspect Chutika. It was an ingenious scheme.

The situation of the village favoured him in a remarkable manner. Though it was not charted on any map he estimated that it stood near the hypothetical boundary betwixt British and Portuguese territory. This, of itself, was an advantage, since, had the British officials been informed of the existence of the place, they would have been dubious

The Ivory Raiders.

whether it came within their jurisdiction, and the Government was not then prepared to spend a large sum on a boundary commission. The village had practically been created by Max for his own purposes. Chancing, when on a hunting expedition, to come across a few ill-built huts, he had been attracted by the remoteness of their position. As the nature of his business made it desirable for him to use a dépôt removed from even the lenient eyes of the Commandant of Orobo, he overawed the timid occupants, and installed his servant Chutika as head man, leaving him sufficient following to build more commodious lodgings and to maintain the leadership of the district. And most useful did Max find this station in many a gun-running transaction, from that day onwards. It was situated on a stream at the highest spot from whence a supply of water could be derived throughout the year. Indeed, during a drought, the inhabitants were often closely pressed to obtain sufficient for their cooking. To the west the country was well watered, but eastwards stretched a desert which could only be crossed under the pilotage of an expert guide, and such men were hard to come by.

A great pity the affair should end in this way, he mused; but it was their own fault for having driven so outrageous a bargain. And when all was said, it was the chances of the country. Men who travel unknown lands must face the consequence.

The Vigil.

They would not be the first or last to die on that waterless table-land, so why trouble ?

Dismissing the matter from his mind, he abandoned himself to the pleasure of the outing. He was glad to be going to Chutika—the place suited him, and he considered he needed bracing up. Moreover, the village was prettily situated among the hills and the comparatively cool climate would be grateful after the stifling heat of Orobo. He called Kalua alongside the *machilla* to talk to him. Yes, she too was glad to be going. They had had a happy time there before, and would do so again, and they chatted over the doings of previous visits, laughing at many reminiscences, he lying easily in the hammock, she scampering at his side. He promised her finer presents than she had seen hitherto, if things went as they should ; whereat her eyes sparkled, and her white teeth gleamed more provokingly than ever. They journeyed at a rapid pace all day, with the exception of a brief stoppage at noon, when Kalua and her satellites were busied with the pots and pans, providing for their lords, and only snatching a mouthful for themselves as they resumed the march.

Raphael spent the journey in a lethargy. He hated travelling ; and having no mental resources to ransack for amusement, he shortened the days by the aid of a tiny bottle which he carried in his waistcoat pocket. Hour after hour he lay without

The Ivory Raiders.

a word passing his lips, one eye shut, one open, staring inscrutably at the green cover which shaded him; mottled of countenance beyond power of removal by soap and water; unprepossessing and disreputable, he looked as if he might be stricken into a mummy by the passage of a single year!

The carriers were driven unsparingly, and after five harassing days they plodded wearily up the hill which led them to their destination. A few minutes later Max and his friend rolled out of their hammocks and stretched their limbs, congratulating each other on the swiftness of their journey; Chutika stood by rendering homage.

At this moment Master Jim gave a sigh of relief. He had been hovering about the bush overlooking the path for two days, and, for want of better occupation, had eaten up his little stock of provisions. Now he started back, taking great care not to expose himself, to convey the news to his masters. They had encamped some thirty miles westwards, sending Jim ahead to scout.

The Arabs had been waiting at the village for some weeks, and had made an encampment down by the river. Raphael went to interview the chief. Kalua with her attendants took possession of the huts set apart for them, and with great cheerfulness superintended the cooking, while Max and the head man conversed. Chutika said that no news had been heard of the caravan, and Max replied

The Vigil.

that such was to be expected, as it was still early. When they came, Chutika had his instructions how to behave, and if he did not bungle matters he would earn a fine reward. No, there was no danger unless Chutika bungled—then he would be in peril from both sides, but that need not be anticipated. Ought they not to send out men to obtain news? Yes; to-morrow, perhaps, they would despatch men to scout along the path to give timely warning of approach of the ivory-laden caravan. To-night they would rest. After supper there would be a dance—a native dance. There was plenty of *pombe*. No, Max had not seen a proper native dance since he was in the district before. He was much looking forward to seeing another.

And this programme was carried out. Max and Raphael dined and drank much wine. Afterwards they sat for hours drinking more wine and watching the dance. The sight was picturesque, though there was a lack of variety in the evolutions.

The musicians sat apart: a man strumming a Kaffir "piano," and two men beating drums; and as they tired, there were volunteers to take their place. The piano was made of a number of wooden oblongs, each having a different density, strung together with twisted bark, and played on with a little mallet. When a native artist took his seat the sounds produced were soft and rippling, though very monotonous; operated by a novice, the noise

The Ivory Raiders.

was irritating and still more monotonous. The drums were formed of pieces of tree-trunk whittled and ornamented on the outside and partly hollowed within. They were covered by snake-skins, which the drummers hit with fondling, sidelong strokes that produced a continuous, muffled roll. Bonfires scattered their phases of crimson and golden light across the circle of the dancers. All was ready. The drums clamoured: the piano gave forth its wavelets of sound: a high-pitched chant with a long-drawn refrain burst from a hundred throats, marked by incessant clapping of hands, and the ring of dancers slowly revolved, each unit performing such antics as pleased him, or gave the most relief to his overwrought emotions. Round they went; now and again a group left its place and gyrated towards the centre with measured steps and childish gesticulations. Another would break away to meet it, and suggestive capers were cut, to the delight of the onlookers, who encouraged their doings with discordant cries. All night did this sleep - dispelling orgie continue, until the cold morning light made the flames of the fire flicker wanly and the mists chilled the wearied dancers to their bones.

At noon, heavy-eyed, Max and Raphael came from their huts and breakfasted. Their quarters were situated apart from the village, a cluster of circular-thatched buildings larger and more

The Vigil.

pretentious-looking than the ordinary native abode. Beneath a big tree their men had pitched a large tent with a canvas porch, in the shadow of which was set the camp-table. Neither was inclined for business after their spree, so they spent the day in feasting and loafing, attending a second dance in the evening.

But early the ensuing morning Max roused himself and bethought it time to take his bearings. This dissipation could not continue. There were many affairs needing attention ; Chutika must be well posted as to his part, scouts sent out, and last arrangements made. He went to Raphael's hut and kicked heavily at the door. Tardily the Jew emerged, and Max rated him for his laziness ; neither was in an amicable mood after their potations, so words were sharply exchanged. They had sat down to their coffee when a boy from the village came bounding up, eager with information.

He had been out early, he told them, long before daybreak, to seek the glades where the "harte-beeste" might be found, in order to kill a buck for the senhores. But when he got to the customary place there were no hartebeeste ; instead, in the distance, smoke issued from among the trees ; he could even hear the sound of voices. Advancing stealthily, under cover of the bush, he saw a big encampment, with many, many men. There was

The Ivory Raiders.

also a tent in the centre, and, as he watched, three white men came forth.

Max sprang to his feet, and asked excitedly :

“ Had they very many slaves with them, and many loads of elephants’ tusks ? ”

“ No, senhor, there were no tusks and no slaves, but very many Masungus.”

“ Are you certain ? ” shouted Max. “ Perhaps there were other men you did not see.”

“ No, senhor, I could see every part of the camp.”

The Jew gave a gasp that was something of a sob, but Max’s rage burst out unrestrainedly.

“ The cursed fools, they’ve bungled it,” he shouted. He made no effort to curb his fury ; it spurted forth like water from an unpent dam. The boy fled at the first ejaculation, and Kalua gathered her little brood as though they were so many chickens and concealed them in a hut. Quitting the tent, the infuriated man ranged the village like a madman, brandishing his heavy stick and shouting threats and blasphemies as he went. Not a man nor child but took shelter, and the hens ran clucking from his path in terror.

Raphael was stricken by the news nearly as sorely as his partner, but it took him in a different form. From the first, he had been less confident of success. Moreover Max, besides hoping for profit, had lusted for revenge against Smart ;

The Vigil.

Raphael had merely to mourn a lamentable speculation, though the loss of money bit him more deeply than it did the fiery Dutchman. And as the Jew reflected dismally upon the matter, his cheeks resting on his clenched fists, he remembered with especial bitterness that he had been persuaded to venture money in this wild enterprise against his business instincts. He had always mistrusted Max's carefully-fostered desire for revenge. Well! several hundred good pounds were now lost, unless they could hoodwink the Arabs and avoid paying them for their protracted idleness. Anyhow there was the original cost of outfitting the raiders. But that was Max's care.

Suddenly a thought struck him that made him start. Why were these men coming back? Had they been beaten by Tembe? It seemed hardly likely, for if so they would not have come *en masse* to Chutika—they would have sent messengers and returned to Orobo, or more likely still set out on a hunting or raiding expedition in their own interest. Raphael strove hard to solve the problem. He knew they were reckless dare-devils—they must be, to have taken the upper hand of the Masungus so completely—and Raphael hated dealings with men of this kind when matters went awry. Could they have turned back in resentment, having learned of the treachery intended against them? It seemed impossible; but how to account for their

The Ivory Raiders.

return? He was now feeling frightened as well as miserable, and to make matters worse his partner came up and flung his stick on the table, scattering the breakfast things and making every nerve go quivering through his body. Max's violence was somewhat spent, though his rancour, if possible, was more venomous. They exchanged glances, the one full of anxiety, the other of sombre wrath.

"Christo!" snarled Max, "I'll tie them up to this tree and have the life slowly beaten out of them. The curs! to bungle the job and then come skulking back like this! They were afraid, curse them, that's what it was!"

To Raphael's mind, his partner's temper added a fresh danger to a perilous situation. Above all things, he wished to avert open conflict, and it was necessary to put the reins on the other's impetuosity. Laying his hand on Max's arm, he began craftily:

"No violence, senhor, no violence! We must proceed cautiously. Meet them fair and speak them fair; but why not leave it to Chutika to deal with them as we arranged? It's so much safer, and besides, no one can talk afterwards."

For the first time Max contemplated the altered situation with some approach to calmness. "The devil burn them! Every day for years I've thought of getting that ivory. I've looked on it as my own,

The Vigil.

and now the hounds have bungled it!" Nevertheless, the Jew's words lodged in his mind. "A nice sum it will cost us, Raphael," he added presently. "But you've got to settle up with those Arabs."

Raphael groaned as he remembered the terms of their compact. However, a more insistent task was to guard against an exchange of blows or bullets, so he replied:

"Yes, Max. But remember, no violence! No one knows how it will end if you once start that game . . . they are desperate men; besides, the other way will hurt them more." As his friend was now attending to him, he added persuasively:

"Send them on to Chindi at once, Max; give them a little money for the journey, and let Chutika take care of them. That is the wise plan."

"How do we know they'll go, you fool?" retorted Max. "There is nothing to take them there now."

"Tell them Orobo is dangerous, senhor. That the commandant wants to catch them. They'll go quick enough if we give them a few rupees. Tomorrow night we'll have another dance, Max, and drink long, cool drinks, and wonder what they are doing."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE STRUGGLE.

As the two were talking, a movement attracted Raphael's eye, and looking up he saw the subjects of their conversation issue from the forest and come smartly along the path that led through the clearing. They marched in Indian file: Kip to the fore, alert and game as a terrier, with his rifle sloping at an aggressive angle; next came Desborough, and if his careless indifference hid a gnawing suspense, nobody suspected it; lastly strode Anderson, his loosely-knit figure seeming more compact than usual, and his mouth was set inflexibly. Jim followed to heel in obvious trepidation.

Raphael noted, to his discomfort, that they came not with the gait of suppliants but as men that demand an explanation. This he remarked to Max, who was also somewhat disconcerted by the boldness of the invasion, and the two hurriedly conferred as to their policy.

Rapidly, but without undue show of haste, the men approached. They spoke no word, for each knew what he had to do. Straight to the tree

The Struggle.

where stood the tent they came, and before any-one sought to hinder them they had taken up their positions.

The traders had hastily agreed to greet them fairly, so rising from the seats they had taken with a view of impressing the new-comers with their self-possession, they offered their hands with florid but unconvincing affability.

The advance was ignored.

With the imperturbability of judges, Anderson and Desborough occupied two boxes lying a few paces from the table, while Kip stood forward as spokesman. Max and his comrade studied their faces, their smiles stiffening into scowls. At last Kip broke the silence. Pointing a portentous forefinger, he began :

" Sit down, you two. We aren't 'ere on no 'and-shaking errand, I can tell you. We've come for a straightening up of accounts."

" Where's the ivory ? " blurted out Max, as they mechanically obeyed the command.

" Safe down in the British Protectorate by now, I expect, and the best place for it."

Then the Dutchman's rage broke forth afresh. " Have Smart's people got it ? " he shouted.

" Guessed right first time," answered Kip complacently ; " or rather the beggar collared it for 'imself, aided by a devil-dodger ! "

Max started to his feet and gripped his stick. It

The Ivory Raiders.

seemed as though rage and disappointment would deprive him of his reason.

"You liars!" he shouted. "Smart's away in England!"

"Sit down, Max Klein, or I won't talk to you," replied Kip. The little man was supreme at such moments, and his even, grating, high-pitched voice had a strangely dominating influence. To the surprise of his comrades, who thought the crisis had come, the Dutchman resumed his seat.

"You 'aven't got no cause for raving," resumed Kip. "At least not yet. Smart was fetched out from England by a cable from the devil-dodger, and they beat us on the post; but the Arabs was after the ivory, too, a big party of 'em. They would just about 'ave knocked Mr. Smart out if we 'adn't lent 'im a hand."

"And you helped Smart," thundered Max, with passionate incredulity, "and yet dared to come back here?"

"Just so, senhor; only, of course, we didn't know it was the bloomin' Commissioner we was 'elpin'. We thought we was just standin' in with some gay young blades like ourselves, an' we was quite willin' to fight 'em for the swag after. Lord, we felt cheaper than mud when we found out what we'd done!"

For the moment Max seemed stupefied, but Raphael interpolated a question in a tone of alarm.

The Struggle.

"My friends, my friends, the Commissioner did not know we were in the business? You never told him that?"

"Now we're coming to the point, Shylock," responded Kip, advancing a step nearer the table. "It so 'appens we've made a bit of a discovery. Your little game's been blown upon: Chutika, the desert, an' us perishin' o' thirst. Oh, we know all about it! and it's that what we've come back to talk about, you cloven-hoofed scavengers."

Max jerked his head in surprise; Raphael's face went grey—he would have spoken, denying the charge, but Kip ran on:

"I see it's true. Well, we've just come back to make yer pay for yer treachery in hard cash."

At this Max laughed discordantly.

"Have you?" he jeered. "Then you've just made the worst error of your lives. You've come into a hornets' nest, you fools! and, by God! you'll never get out of it alive."

The Arabs had straggled up from their encampment, and were perplexedly watching the spectacle. Max would have signalled to the chief to seize the three intruders, but Anderson, who was fingering his rifle, without putting it to his shoulder brought the muzzle into line with the Dutchman's chest. Desborough kept his eyes on the third button of the Jew's pyjamas. The trio had taken a position of strategical value. With a quiver of apprehension

The Ivory Raiders.

Max realised the situation, but recovering himself he exclaimed :

" See here, you madmen, don't you imagine you can come here and blackmail us. All these men are in our pay, and we've only got to lift our little finger to have you shot. I suppose you think you have got the Masungus on your side by making lying promises. But you are wrong. Not one would go against us. They daren't. You've put yourselves in our hands, and you will be lucky if you get out of this alive."

"You're a liar, Max Klein," said Kip calmly, "and besides bein' a liar you're thick'headed. Do you think we should come in 'ere without we took pretty good care we knew our way out again? When you've 'eard what we've got to say you'll be pretty glad to pay up and look pleasant, and thank Gawd we 'aven't hurt you more."

"Go on," snarled Max. "I may as well hear you, and I'll tell you how I'm going to treat you afterwards."

But there was a calm certitude about his adversaries that was disconcerting, and the very audacity of their demand alarmed him. Kip confronted them, truculent, vindictive, and menacing, and behind sat his comrades, frigid but alert; their weapons had a grimly convincing aspect. They evidently knew what they wanted, and had staked their lives to obtain it.

The Struggle.

The Arabs were now absorbed spectators, though they understood but little of what was said. Coming nearer they squatted in a semicircle to the right of the tent, wondering why these exasperating intruders were not given them to be dealt with. The Masungus, who had watched the first passages from the fringe of the forest, seeing that their captains were holding their own, took courage, and ranged themselves in the background, while behind them again were the carriers, looking askance at the Arabs and feeling very much like mice in the presence of a cat.

"Oh! will you tell us how you are going to treat us afterwards?" retorted Kip, mimicking the Dutchman's accent. "But maybe you'll 'ear what we've got to say first. Now look 'ere! When we left Orobo we didn't think much of you, nor of your skulking mate neither, and we reckoned you might be gettin' up to some dirty trick or other, so we just studied how to take the sting out of your tails. Now I suppose you 'aven't forgotten that little agreement?"

At the word two of his audience betrayed some uneasiness.

"I see you remember," he resumed, in the manner of a counsel for the prosecution, ticking the points off on his fingers. "Well, I wrote it pretty plain as to language, didn't I? It explained the situation to a T, so that there was no mistakin'

The Ivory Raiders.

what we meant. Now what would you say to hearin' that little bit o' paper's lyin' comfortable at Chindi ready to come before the eyes of the British consul if anything 'appens to us?"

The news told heavily. Raphael was aghast, and Max for the moment was off his balance, but quickly mastering himself, he shouted: "It's a lie! You couldn't get it there."

Kip was at his zenith. Encouraged by the dismay he was causing, he retorted: "Couldn't we? How about the *Crocodile*? And, what's more, if we don't turn up pretty soon the consul *will* set eyes on the inside of that paper, whether anything 'appens to us or not; so you've got to touch your 'ats and ask us to get it back before you sleep sound of a night. Wot do you think of that, you sneakin' traitors?" he asked proudly. "Now p'raps you ain't so anxious to tell us what you're goin' to do to us, though I can tell you what you're goin' to do. You're goin' to 'and over that money without hurtin' a 'air of our heads, and send us down to Chindi first-class marked 'fragile, this side up with care,' and please Gawd we won't get drowned, so as the consul in'erits that little bit o' paper. Smart'll be passin' down the river about that time on 'is way 'ome, but I reckon 'e'll stop an' take the next boat, once 'e sees that agreement."

His antagonists heard him mutely. They were as a defenceless barque under the pitiless fire of a

The Struggle.

pirate, and the last shot struck them amidships. Raphael groaned.

"I knew that cursed agreement was goin' to work us harm, Max," he cried, "but you were so obstinate. See the trouble it's got us into now."

Max was not so easily daunted, and again he sprang up.

"By God, it's a lie—it's all lies. You hadn't a man to send. Every one of those Masungus had orders not to let you send any messages back, and they knew I would kill any man that came within a mile of Orobo once they started. You may have made fools of them after, but I swear you didn't in time to get a message back to catch the *Crocodile*, for I should have known instantly if any of the Masungus or carriers returned. Don't you think you can deceive me with such child's nonsense. I'm not a fool!"

Now Jim, up to that moment, had been endeavouring to reduce himself to the size of a rabbit behind Anderson's back, and so far had passed unnoticed. But to his horror Kip turned, and with an elaborate gesture pointed to him.

"Allow me to introduce our friend Mr. Jim, what joined the day we left. We found 'im very useful as a postman, besides bein' a good cook and most reliable."

And thus reminded of Jim, Kip thought it convenient to explain how they had got news of the

The Ivory Raiders.

conspiracy plotted at Orobo. "Jim's wife, gentlemen," he continued ironically, "happens to be in the employment of our friend Judas sittin' there—not that I wish to reflect against 'er character. Now Jim, being a lovin' 'usband, visited his wife when 'e went back with our letter, and learned all about your arrangements, for Mrs. Jim is an educated lady and understands Portuguese. Like all her sex, she's inquisitive, and ain't above doin' a bit of eavesdroppin'. Fearin' 'er spouse would come to grief she told 'im what she'd 'eard, but Jim 'ad his own axe to grind, so kept quiet for a bit. Consequently we didn't 'ave the pleasure of comin' back and callin' on you earlier. Not but what we wouldn't 'ave carried out our contract if we got the chance."

While he spoke, Max felt that he would give half his fortune for the courage to order the Arabs to fire upon his enemies, but Anderson was watching him like a ferret. And however certain it might prove that the minority would be overwhelmed in a general combat, Max knew that he would receive the first shot from that rifle which^{so} negligently yet persistently eyed him. It was obvious that he must wait until the others gave him an opening, so he controlled himself to endure Kip's gibes and explanations, and thus it slowly came to him that he and his partner were ensnared in a net, wondrously simple in construction, yet for all that

The Struggle.

possibly efficacious. In his exasperation his eye fell upon Jim. Here was a scapegoat that might be sacrificed, so, seizing his stick, he dashed forward. Jim howled in terror, but quickly as Max moved, Anderson was quicker. Dropping his rifle, he met Max half-way. Here, at last, was man's work to be accomplished. Tightening his fists, he planted himself squarely in front of his opponent.

"Touch him," he said, "and I'll break every bone in your body."

Max pulled up, and the two measured each other. There was not much to choose with regard to height or weight. The Dutchman was the younger, and was, besides, armed with a heavy stick, yet anyone who knew them both would have wagered on Anderson, for a combat such as was imminent brought joy to his soul, while every blow he received would only spur him to sterner efforts. The groups of onlookers watched with glittering eyes. Now they should see something. But though the principals were in the lists, fighting was the last thing their comrades desired. Desborough and Kip saw that, once a blow was taken, a general combat became inevitable, and their adventure was a lost cause. Yet perforce they had to remain inactive, terrible as was the strain upon them, for they felt that their intervention would hasten a conflict, instead of hindering it.

As the protagonists stood thus, the head man of

The Ivory Raiders.

the Arabs manoeuvred to attract Raphael's attention, and with unmistakable gestures inquired if he should let loose his men; but Raphael, thinking of the fateful agreement, and feeling Desborough's glance upon him, shook his head dismally. Yet he it was who restored the situation. Goaded almost to bravery by the thought that the next moment would witness a *mêlée*, he started from the table and flung himself between the two men.

"No violence, senhores; for the love of God, no violence! This matter can be settled without blows."

This interference was not unwelcome to Max. He had incautiously set out to thrash a nigger, and saw no benefit in the personal quarrel that met him. Still he could not tamely submit, so, turning on the peacemaker, he struck him a back-handed blow which sent him reeling against the table. Blood issued from Raphael's nostrils, but he hardly noticed it; he had prevented a conflict, and that was a matter for congratulation. Kip's next words, however, recalled him to his trouble.

"S'pose we get on with the business. You can knock each other silly when we've done with you."

Max was the first to regain his self-possession.

"A pretty sort of lie," he exclaimed, after a pause. "Gentlemen, you are not such great fools as I at first thought. You have imagination, but

The Struggle.

you cannot give me any proof that what you say is true."

In answer Kip took out his pocket-book and extracted the greasy piece of paper on which the engineer of the *Crocodile* had scribbled his message. This he tossed to Raphael, who was standing at the table wiping his nose.

"Read that, sonny," he said triumphantly. The breeze caught the paper and tossed it to the feet of the Jew, who glanced at its contents and passed it on to Max: but the Dutchman's suspicious glance had detected another envelope in the pocket-book.

"What's that paper?" he asked sharply.

Two men bear testimony that Kip blushed.

"Oh," he replied, with assumed diffidence, "that's a matter between me an' a lady, nothing concerning you, matey."

Anderson gave a loud guffaw. It seemed a noble omen that "The Luck" should show itself at such a fateful moment. His suspicions disarmed by the laugh, Max scrutinised the letter he held in his hand.

There could be no doubt as to its authenticity. Both he and Raphael were familiar with the handwriting, as, on every trip made by the *Crocodile*, one or the other was called on to supply stores for the crew, for which the engineer signed. With unpleasant distinctness they recalled the night in question, when Mr. Sanderson had dined with

The Ivory Raiders.

them, and his plaintive reference to the ensuing headache gave actuality to his evidence. Yet, convinced despite themselves, it was unthinkable that they should hand over money on such a score, even a moderate sum, and this to the very men they were aching to crush. But how to avoid it? They set their minds furiously to work to find a way out of the trap. Their opponents, however, had noted the undermining effect of the engineer's letter, and did not intend to let them regain ground. Without wishing to appear over-anxious, it was necessary to set a period to the interview.

Hitherto Kip had done all the talking: now Desborough took his cue, and his voice was decisive.

"Look here, Max Klein, we don't intend to talk all day. We give you half an hour to make up your minds. If you pay up, six thousand in cheques, six hundred in notes, that agreement is burned within ten days. If you refuse we trek south, and as we pass the telegraph lines we'll send a wire that will ensure Smart getting that agreement directly he arrives at Chindi. He knows you are in this business, because he recognised some of your Masungus, and he told me that if he could get a jot of evidence against you he would land you in gaol as sure as his name was Archibald Smart. He has a grudge against you over the last affair, and he would go a

The Struggle.

thousand miles out of his way to get you over this job."

"Aye," added Kip. "He'll extradite you out of hell inside of forty-eight hours."

Max had managed to school his passion, though his rage had fastened upon him like a black frost.

"Your document is worthless, and I defy you, and Smart'also. You see, you can't hurt me without putting yourself in gaol too."

"There you are wrong, Max," replied Desborough. "We practically saved Smart's party from the Arabs, so, provided we cleared out of British territory at once, he was agreeable to call the matter quits. We have only got to keep quietly out of the way. But he has got a terrible spite against you."

"I see," retorted Max grimly. "When you found the Commissioner in trouble, you sought favour by helping him, and sacrificed your employers on the spot."

"No, sirree," answered Kip. "The fightin' took place first, and we introduced ourselves—Gawd, 'ow we introduced ourselves!—after, an' found we'd fell up against Her Majesty's bloomin' Commissioner an' a devil-dodger, an' we thinkin' all the while they was ivory-snatchers. But if we 'ad gone back on you, Max, we'd only have kep' in the fashion!"

Max was silenced, and Desborough struck in sharply:

The Ivory Raiders.

"You must be quick and make up your minds. I for one don't care which way you decide. It will be as satisfactory to set the dogs on you as to get the money. But remember this—that in thirty minutes we close the *offer*"—in after days he gloated over the word—"after that, if you go on your knees, it's ten thousand or nothing. Take your choice."

"But," cried Raphael in excitement, "the bargain was only for six thousand."

The three quivered with gratification, for the protest showed a great advance in their prospects; thereby the speaker acknowledged the likelihood of a sum of money changing hands, and it was now merely a dispute as to the amount rather than a desperate fight to obtain anything. Max realised this too, for he scowled evilly upon his partner; but from the moment Raphael had read the engineer's letter he had felt himself a beaten man, and saw the whole of his property in jeopardy. He was as crafty as sin, but not at all brave, and the situation had jarred every nerve in his body.

"Yes," drawled Desborough, with provoking slowness, "that's quite right. But besides our share of the contract we have gone bail that the rest of the crew are paid. And the sum I mention will cover everyone."

"But, gentlemen," contested Raphael, "we give

The Struggle.

them orders on our stores for pay, we never give them money."

Desborough grinned. "Yes; I expect you fleece them each way, Raphael; but this time they're going to have cash. Pleasant change for them."

Then he spoke sharply. "But you've heard our terms. Take them or leave them. We won't give them a second time. If you don't stump up you know what to expect. And you had better clear out of the country as hard as you can run."

None of these scapegraces possessed a watch, and Kip had thoughts of borrowing one from the other side, but rightly decided that such levity was out of place. Desborough elected to act as timekeeper, and improvised a sundial with a stone and the shadow of the branch of a tree; he estimated that when the edge of the shadow cut the centre of the stone some thirty minutes would have elapsed. The three sat motionless, their eyes fixed on their adversaries. Not a sound was made by the onlookers, for a feeling of suppressed excitement was over the camp. The Arabs watched their doings intently. They understood little, but realised that in spite of the inaction a struggle of vital consequence was at issue, and the black looks on their employers' faces told who was getting the worst of it. They marvelled at the strange power these intruders held. The Masungus squatted spell-bound. Their champions were

The Ivory Raiders.

holding their own, and they considered that the pay promised to them was half-way towards their pockets. And in the background the carriers forgot their dread of the Arabs, and stared with wondering eyes and open mouths.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE RESULT.

THE shadow edged closer to the stone, still neither was word spoken nor movement made. Raphael could contrive no escape from the toils; indeed, the danger in which the balance of his property stood while that accursed agreement was unreclaimed seemed to have blunted his wits, for he wasted his time in plotting a revenge that had slight chance of taking effect. Max sat and scowled at the surface of the table. He could hardly comprehend that his adversaries were serious in their demands. The slightness of the hand they held was so disproportionate to the largeness of the stakes . . . surely they were bluffing! Yet he could produce no cards to equal theirs, and a glance at their grim, unyielding faces showed not a doubt as to their determination. As the likelihood of defeat became more evident he found it the harder to control himself, and turned impulsively to summon the Arabs to his aid; but the significant fingering of a revolver stiffened his arm to obedience, and made him realise the length of his tether.

The shadow grazed the side of the stone, and

The Ivory Raiders.

Desborough said curtly, "It's half time ;" then the silence closed again, broken only by the chirruping of a garrulous cigala in a neighbouring tree, and the occasional shifting of a cramped limb. Through the aperture of Kalua's hut a cluster of kneeling figures watched timorously the unprecedented subjugation of their master. They would have felt less uneasiness had he cursed and flung his stick about.

At last Max turned to his companion with a fierce but subdued whisper :

"It's no good sitting here like caged monkeys to be sneered at," he said in Portuguese. "Can't you think of some road out of this fools' trap? There must be a dozen ways of turning the tables, if I could only hit on one!"

"If it weren't for that agreement, senhor! I knew——"

"Curse your whimpering," interjected the other. "Look here, I'm going to get it back. We must tie up these madmen and let the Arabs hold them prisoners; go down to Chindi, make Sanderson tell us where he took the letter, and buy it back. That's the way to treat them!"

Raphael laughed mirthlessly. "Try it!" he said. "As well try and bind three wild cats as these spiteful devils. If there is a scuffle, Max, they shoot first, and I'm not sure they would not get off scathless. If we were knocked over there

The Result.

would be no reason in the Arabs fighting them—they would be more likely to offer their services. And I don't go near Chindi, with Smart in the neighbourhood, till that agreement is recovered ; it is my belief that the packet was sent sealed to the British Consul himself, with instructions that it is to be delivered to no one, and opened in the event of their not returning. Who else could they have sent it to ? You know the character we bear with the British, and we should look well if that agreement were opened in our faces ! ”

“ You haven't the pluck of a mosquito ! ” sneered his comrade, who, notwithstanding, was depressed by his words. “ Well, haven't you a plan ? ”

“ Bargain with them, Max. Knock them down to a thousand apiece and settle. It is cruel on us, but the only safe way.”

“ I'll be shot if I pay them a rupee,” retorted Max ; but his manner was not so bold as his words. “ If we knew the date the Consul was to open the letter we might do something. I would give a hundred rupees to find out.”

“ You've about five minutes left,” interrupted Desborough. “ After that we move, and it's ten thousand pounds or nothing. Are the carriers ready, Kip ? ”

“ Gentlemen,” cried Raphael, “ be a little generous ! You have been deceived, we meant you no harm. Your servant is a notorious liar. We

The Ivory Raiders.

are willing to behave most handsomely towards you and give you five hundred pounds in reward for your services. On my honour, we are poor men!"

"You are wasting time," returned Desborough. "I should say it is four minutes now."

"We'll make it a thousand," volunteered Raphael nervously.

There came no reply.

Up sprang Max from the table.

"Have you done with them, Raphael? I spit on them and their worthless agreement. We'll defy it, brazen it out, and if Smart can do anything we'll all go to gaol together. Come, let's end this fools' meeting."

His adversaries did not budge.

"You talk big, Max Klein," said Desborough coolly, "but you know you don't mean what you say. You're not the man to cut off your nose to spite your face. Smart will take that agreement straight to the Governor of Mozambique, and they will decide how to deal with you. We ourselves don't run a great risk. You have now two minutes." He turned to his comrade. "Call the carriers we've selected, Kip. We can cross the telegraph in a week, then nothing less than ten thousand pounds will stop a wire." He stood watching the sundial for the expiration of the truce.

Max dropped back on his chair with an oath.

The Result.

The thought of Smart possessing that agreement poisoned him. The accommodating Commandant of Orobo certainly turned a lenient eye from the transactions of the two partners, but Max's affairs were in no state to face an enquiry by the Governor, and his adversaries had divined this fact. In desperation Raphael scanned the merciless faces of the trio, and, gaining not a hope therefrom, he went into the hut where the personal baggage was stored.

"Dog him, Kip," said Anderson, "see there is no mischief."

Imp-like, Kip tiptoed to the door of the hut. A minute later the other emerged with a leather bag, a book of forms such as are used by big trading houses, pen and ink. He returned to the table, and Kip, fearless as ever, followed, and posted himself behind them. Raphael, his hands trembling, took from the bag three bundles of notes—English, Portuguese and Colonial—and two small bags of coin. Then he took a pen.

"Make it three thousand, gentlemen. Just think! One thousand each—it is a heap of money, so help me God."

Desborough looked at him coldly, and replied "It is within an ace of being ten thousand."

Here Max interposed. "But supposing we were fools enough to pay, how should we get that cursed paper back?"

The Ivory Raiders.

"We shall either destroy it or send it back when we've got the money safe," responded Desborough; and Max thought he saw an opening.

"It is likely we are going to trust you!" he said. "Look here, Desborough, I will go down with you to Chindi and we will settle with you there. That's fair enough."

Desborough laughed. "You betrayed us once, or tried to; you don't get a second chance. And it seems to me rather foolish to risk a meeting with Smart. But you know you can trust us, and I pledge my word that that document is destroyed ten minutes after we cash your paper, for our own sakes."

Raphael gazed beseechingly around him, as though hoping for some miraculous intervention of Providence. But the motionless forest offered him no sympathy, and he filled in two forms save for the signature. Surely there must be an alternative? Suddenly Max turned and gripped Kip fiercely by the arm. He would hold him as a hostage and make one last attempt.

Swiftly, but with admirable precision, Desborough and Anderson raised their rifles. Their faces were pallid, but with the natural shrinking of the executioner, not through fear for their own bodies. Raphael shut his eyes, and sullenly Max loosened his grasp.

A moment later a draft on a well-known trading

The Result.

house, signed by the two men, lay on the table, and Max covered his eyes with his hands.

Kip leaned forward, scanned the papers, swept the notes and coins into the bag, and took them to Desborough. "This is your job," he said. "Pay off the Masungus and the carriers, and then we will git. We've scooped the pool, but we're none too welcome to stay here."

It was a relief, even to the vanquished, that the high mental tension was relaxed. Max and Raphael now made no pretence at keeping up an appearance, but sat in utter dejection. The humiliation had been hard to endure, but the parting with so much money was overwhelming. They could not even hope for revenge, for any attempt would recoil upon themselves if taken before the agreement was destroyed; and they could expect but little chance afterwards.

To them both it was an hour of inconceivable bitterness, especially to Max Klein. Here was a fine ending to years of scheming and desire! Smart had obtained the ivory, and into the bargain Max had been subjected to insult and derision, outwitted by men whom he had regarded as his dupes, and bereft of a fair slice of his capital. How he spurned himself for having put a signature to the cheque! But, held under the menace of those rifles he had lost some of his nerve, and his hand had betrayed him. Again, remembering the agreement and the

The Ivory Raiders.

vigilant Smart, he doubted if he would have it otherwise. What devils were these he had commissioned as his agents? Despite himself, he looked at them with a reluctant admiration. Anderson and Kip endeavouring to dissemble their radiant satisfaction, sat on the two boxes, a warning to him, if such were needed, to forgo any thought of reprisal. Desborough had taken the ready money and was cheerfully subdividing it into small sums for the more convenient payment of the carriers. It was a poignant lesson to Max to note the way he called one grinning villager after another, questioning him as to the number of men that sat at his camp fire, and handing him a packet of dirty notes and coins for distribution. It was an added poignancy to note the veneration that these men showed to their paymaster, and the way that they scuttled into the bush after receiving their money. No sight could have been more unwelcome.

With a chill of regret Max remembered that by straight dealing he might have made this dauntless trio his allies. They would have been invaluable to him in some of his enterprises. Raphael was without an equal in work that needed mere deceit and commercial depravity, but, as in the present instance, where boldness and dash were essential, Max admitted that his partner was a failure. He had never enlisted whole-heartedly in the present venture, and, as a consequence, had cut an inglorious figure at

The Result.

its disastrous ending. Max spared him no thought of pity.

Desborough primarily disposed of the carriers, with the exception of half-a-dozen who had been selected to go to the journey's end. Then he attended to the Masungus. These men, he considered, were more capable of safeguarding their own interests, and less deserving of sympathy if they were swindled, so he handed Binzi a sum sufficient to acquit himself of his liabilities, and added a liberal present for the *capitão*, who had composed for the occasion a florid oration, which he proceeded to deliver. But Desborough cut him short.

"We've done what we promised," he said, "and require no thanks. Next time an English-speaking man comes along, serve him as you've learned to serve us, and you'll find yourselves nothing out of pocket by it. Senhores, *adeus*."

A hundred hats were flourished, and a chorus of benedictions greeted Jim's interpretation of the remark. Bob bowed also; then, as an afterthought, shook hands with Binzi, and retired.

"We had best be moving, David," he said, as he rejoined his comrade.

Anderson rose from his box, and looked hard at Max and Raphael before he spoke.

"You've only yourselves to thank for this, Max Klein, and you, Raphael. If you had meant honest by us, we would have lost our heads before we went

The Ivory Raiders.

back on you. Now, if you attempt any tricks before we leave the country, your blood be on your own head, and there'll be plenty of it."

Calling to Jim he shouldered his rifle, and strode along a path leading to the high land west of the village. The little party of carriers picked up their loads and followed, glad to escape from a spot that had promised so many dangers. Bob motioned Kip to precede him, but the little man protested, so waving his hand in the direction of the Masungus and the few carriers that had not already drifted into the bush, he departed close on the heels of the others. But to Kip so tame an exit was incompatible with the glorious doings of the morning. Standing in the middle of the deserted piece of ground, he turned towards the Arabs with a low bow, and, putting the tips of his fingers to his eyebrows in a manner which he imagined to be oriental, shouted "Salaam!" One or two of the Arabs ironically returned the salutation. Catching sight of Kalua, he kissed his hand to her. The remnant of the Masungus received the benefit of the dozen words of Portuguese he had learned on the trip, and they returned his cordiality with warmth. Lastly, he faced the conveners of this gathering, and his impudence waxed unabashed.

"Fare thee well, my children! We've tried to put you in the bloomin' path that leads to righteousness. Keep . . ."

The Result.

Max's stick had missed his head by an inch, and the next minute Kip had also disappeared round the winding of the path.

As he turned the corner, Raphael ran to the top of an ant-heap to obtain a last glimpse of these marauders, and lifting his hand to the skies, he cursed their pedigree, root and branch.

But Max spoke never a word.

CHAPTER XX.

THE RETURN.

As the victors left the village their gait gave no hint of their exuberant feelings. Making an over-draft on their self-restraint, they marched with sober footsteps ; but once out of sight they frolicked and capered like boys at play. Certainly they were not clear of danger. Max could change his mind, and, Pharaoh-like, send his army to destroy them ; but the crisis was past, speed would prove their salvation, and joyfully they raced along the path.

Not one pang of shame did these scapegraces feel at the manner in which their booty had been obtained. Had the position been reversed, they argued, their opponents would have treated them pitilessly, and they were prepared to demonstrate with figures, fists or firearms, that they had tempered their ascendancy with logic and justice.

The carriers, also, were possessed of this light-heartedness. Their loads were not burdensome, a fine reward surely was in store, and it was too fine a chance for gaiety to be missed ; so they skipped and danced as joyfully as their masters.

The Return.

Time went unnoticed, once they were by themselves, and before their legs were schooled to a decent walk they had reached a tiny water-hole a league distant from Chutika. Here João awaited them; he had given Max Klein a wide passage that morning. His late master when sending him on the expedition had set him as a spy upon the leaders, and the boy had qualms as to whether he had fulfilled Max's conception as to his duty; so he had sapiently enjoyed the encounter from the fork of a neighbouring tree, until, assured of the result, he set out to waylay the winning party.

A consultation was held over some hurried mouthfuls of food. They had decided to face the desert on which Max had proposed to turn them adrift. It was passable, provided the guides were faithful and competent. Dangerous it might be, but the travellers were forewarned, and the shortest route had an irresistible attraction to them. One of the carriers had been chosen because he professed a knowledge of this country, and it was discovered that Jim, in his boyhood, had accompanied a caravan of Arabs as far as the big river beyond. Like many of his race he never forgot a trail he had followed. The sun was still short of the meridian, and if they pushed forward a camping-ground might be found an hour or so after dark. No one thought of tarrying—the proximity of those desperate, baffled men, no longer held in check by

The Ivory Raiders.

fear of a bullet, was disquieting. The baggage was again overhauled, and reduced to stringent necessities. This would allow three of the carriers to run light, relieving their comrades every few miles. The abandoned goods were pounced on by these men and hidden in the bush until such time as they might return for them, thereby doubling their capital. More than half the ammunition was also jettisoned, for the fighting time was over, and it was now a question of speed. After filling with water such receptacles as they carried, they tightened their belts and set out.

The path rose abruptly. Leaving the valley that sheltered the pool, they struck out towards the high lands. After clambering up a sombre gorge they emerged on a barren plateau. The country stretched desolately before them. Large yellow withering leaves depended inanimately from the trees, offering no shelter and giving the landscape an autumnal aspect. The soil was red and arid ; sparse vegetation sustained with difficulty a meagre existence ; the desiccated grasses rustled drearily ; on the stony surfaces cactus-flowers manifested their hardihood in a display of queerly-shaped magenta blossoms ; bayonet-pointed aloes flourished in the crevices, and, as a rarity, some bush, having a different season from its fellows, and drawing its moisture from unsuspected sources, attracted the eye by its vivid greenery. Scattered about were

The Return.

monumental rocks, grim and erect for the most part, though in places sunken and decayed; yet so strongly anchored were they in hidden jaws that old Mother Earth must have endured many a toothache in inclement weather! Afoot there was no sign of life, but overhead three vultures circled hopefully—a meal sometimes came to them with human footsteps in this wilderness.

The sight of the birds brought sharply home to the wayfarers the fate that Max had designed for them, and they cheered themselves by the thought of the drafts.

When night fell they made a brief halt; biscuits were served out and the water-bottles emptied. The stars scattered the bush with shadows and filled the open spaces with a steel-blue glamour. It was a lengthy march, but what was an extra mile or so to men in their condition? On they went again, the pace unabated.

About ten o'clock Jim pointed to a slight depression in the ground, and they ran eagerly forward, to discover a miniature pool covered by water-plants. It seemed miraculous that the guides should hit upon this tiny spot in that unvarying wilderness. On their approach a light-footed animal scuttled away into the bush, but it was the only tenant of the place, and the invaders unrolled their blankets, unpacked some provisions—and fell asleep while eating them.

The Ivory Raiders.

At daybreak they were astir again—the ground as a couch affords no inducement for lying abed—and they were impatient to get to the end of the journey. It was smooth, level walking, over hard-caked earth which supported a sparse and stunted vegetation. There was no path, but the guides had powerful memories, and they steered by some distant mountain peaks and the topographical features.

About midday Jim turned, like a pointer drawing on game, sharply to the left, ran to a thicket, and proudly discovered a water-hole. Prudence now dictated a halt till evening, as the next camping-place was distant—it would be midnight before they could reach it; but they felt nervous and overstrung, totally unable to compose themselves to sleep. The idea of passing several hours in so barren a spot was intolerable, and they longed to have achieved so great a length of their journey as the next stage would mark. Indeed they could hardly bring themselves to pause while they ate. The carriers, who joined with the guides in pleading for a rest, were bribed by the promise of additional rupees; the bottles were refilled and the journey resumed.

They marched gallantly until sunset when they halted, drank the last drops of water and ate some tinned meat. As the carriers had no provisions, they shared with their masters, all agreeing that it was "go as you please" until they reached a

The Return.

settlement. The air was cool, and they dwelt proudly on the swift passage they were making.

Nevertheless, as evening advanced, it became evident that they would be greatly relieved at reaching a camping-ground. There was no thought of preparing food, just one cool drink, a biscuit, and sleep. The stars warned them that it was nearing midnight, but the guides strode on without slackening; it seemed as though they were walking rapidly, but in truth they were so wearied that they made but poor progress. At last Juão gave a shout, and scampered to some small rocks ahead. Worn out though they were, they all made a run for them, overjoyed to finish an exhausting day. But a calamity awaited them. A small rocky basin, that was reputed to hold water at this season, was as dry as a biscuit-tin. It was no use digging, as the granite outcropped all around. Their only course was to make for the next water-hole, and they were dubious if they had the strength for it.

From the guides they learned that the pool was six hours distant—six hours' brisk marching, and they were only able to limp along. Their throats were dry and their limbs ached wearily for a rest. It seemed as if Max's intentions might after all be fulfilled. Kip begged that they should camp, water or no water, but the others overruled him: rest without nourishment would give but slight refreshment, their limbs would stiffen, and the morning

The Ivory Raiders.

would find them in a more serious plight, with the journey to be accomplished under a glaring sun. In desperation the little man threw away his rifle, which Juão retrieved, and the others reduced their baggage still further. Then they struggled on.

How they won through that night they hardly knew. Each man fostered his hopes by telling himself that at sunrise they would be near to water, but they were conscious of self-deception, as the miles were covered slowly. The march was a clinging, enduring nightmare, and they would have forgone the prize they had wrested at Chutika to wake and find themselves in bed. The carriers were in somewhat better plight. They were but lightly loaded, and, having been reared on short commons and hardship, suffered less than their masters. Jim and Juão trudged ahead, waiting at intervals for the others to come up with them, a consideration for which Desborough and Anderson mentally voted them an increase of pay.

Fortunately their path led them down hill; they were leaving the plateau and making for the plain beyond. This was stimulating, though their surroundings were very dreary. It seemed to them as they staggered on that rocks loomed from out of the darkness, approached with a tired, drunken gait, and dropped wearily to the rear: stones struck their feet, and fallen branches tripped them. The stars appeared to be stationary in the sky, so anxiously

The Return.

were they scanned to tell the passing of the time. Later, a lop-sided moon cleared the ridges and flung relentless rays of light into their dazed eyes.

At times they were forced to rest, and Kip would straightway fall into a stupor, from which it took rough shaking to wake him and kicks to make him proceed. After interminable plodding, the moon paled and the east became luminous. They were now stumbling forward listlessly. Whenever he thought himself unobserved, Kip dropped behind and sought shelter of a bush in the hope of being forgotten, and his comrades realised with shame that they were coming to regard him as an encumbrance. But the two boys came to the rescue ; taking an arm apiece, with force, reproaches, and even blows, they brought him along.

The rising sun found them in this condition and did nothing to improve it. Now even Jim and João showed marks of distress, while the carriers had lagged behind out of sight. Anderson and Desborough were only aware that they battled on ; they had no idea of time, and dared not stop to think of it. They could keep their minds fixed on no definite subject, though the thought of water was ever uppermost. Sometimes they imagined they saw it, rivers of it, blue and alluring, with cool shadows under the banks. It beckoned from hundreds of miles away—as far as heaven seemed when they were children—and they felt they could never

The Ivory Raiders.

reach it. Instinct told them it was the manly thing to keep going as long as possible and then drop, but if God were merciful they would drop quickly.

No one knew exactly when—it seemed sometime in the middle of a century—but João left the staggering, unreasonable Kip, and ran forward. Then they observed a row of trees more verdant than those surrounding them, and a narrow gully. Instantly their mind filled it with running water, and they plunged onwards, stumbling over the stones like blind men. And all they saw was a parched, sandy watercourse!

They regarded it stupidly. Had they had the power they would have cursed João, or flung him over the bank, but the effort was too gigantic to think of, so they stood and stared. For the boy, nowise disconcerted, was scrambling purposefully down the bank. Dropping on his knees, he burrowed with his hands like a dog.

Instantly the others took his meaning and followed, with the exception of Kip, who had collapsed in a bundle underneath a tree. In a few moments they were rewarded by the tantalising smell of moisture, and then water began to trickle through the gravel. They sucked the pebbles and such drops as they could gather, without making any impression on their parched and leathery tongues. With patience, however,

The Return.

some energy was restored to them, and they dug fresh holes, placing an empty meat-tin, which the boys had thriftily retained, to catch the water. Presently they remembered their comrade, and sought him on the bank. He was trying to talk to himself with a blackening tongue, but they gave him a small drink and he fell asleep. The carriers straggled in, parched and footsore. More holes were dug, and they plunged their dry, dusty faces and protruding tongues in the damp sand. In a quarter of an hour the whole party had fallen asleep.

CHAPTER XXI.

DOWN THE RIVER.

Two days later the travellers had reached the banks of a big river. They were gaunt and unkempt in appearance, and their clothes were tattered past repair; but they were in jubilant spirits, nevertheless. The carriers were preparing a meal. In honour of their arrival at a waterway, the spendthrifts had decided to cook all the provisions that remained. These were few enough, though Anderson had shot a young bush-buck that morning, and the carcass, spitted and skewered, was being roasted by the carriers, who attended to the work with loving attention.

The three vagrants sat watching the river with an emotion newly-stirred. These hurrying waters were flowing towards the seaboard, there to lap the sides of ocean-going steamers. The country facing them was British; some leagues to the north there must be a station flying the Union Jack, with well-built bungalows flanked by spacious verandas, on which the white-clad officials spent their superabundant leisure. Certainly they had no use for Government officials, English or

Down the River.

otherwise, at the present time, nor had they ever regarded such people with esteem ; still the knowledge brought to them a sense of home-coming.

The cooks gave the roasting buck a final turn, the last handful of tea was tossed into an empty biscuit-tin, which served them both as cup and teapot ; the biscuits were evenly apportioned, and the meal was ready. This little banquet was being held in honour of the vagabond past.

They no longer feared that Max could do them an injury, as the speed of their journey had put them beyond his reach. Nor had they a doubt that his and his partner's drafts would be negotiated without demur. And after this transaction they had decided, individually, that they would return to England. Yet somehow the blessings of civilisation did not lure them so brightly as they had done when as derelicts they had been tossed upon the sullen seas of unsuccess. The obligation of using starched shirts and restrained language seemed formidable as it came near to them.

This was their first opportunity of gossiping about the encounter at Chutika, and, as they ate their meal, many a detail, scarce noticed at the time, was recalled and commented on with gusto.

"Six thousand quid ! It seems too good to be true," said Kip, at length. "It's a couple of thousand apiece."

"Three," remarked Desborough quietly.

The Ivory Raiders.

"'Ow do you make that out? Three men into six thousand quid goes twice and nothing over," retorted Kip, with the sure conviction of a mathematician.

Desborough looked apologetic. He had a disclosure to make that could no longer be put off.

"The fact is, boys," he began, "I'm not going to stand in with the division of that money. Don't think," he went on, hastily, "that it's because I'm scrupulous. It's only because I don't need it."

His comrades regarded him with an amazement too profound for words.

"If you lend me enough to get down to Durban I can get plenty of money there," he explained, nervously. Then, afraid that they might think that he had been selfishly hoarding up his money, he added: "I only got it when we were at Beira, and it was sent to me for the purpose of returning home."

Ejaculations of doubt and derision, chiefly profane, here interrupted him, and both enquired incredulously as to where the money had come from.

Bob explained patiently.

"And do you mean to tell us you've been trapesing round this fool-country like a dead-beat, when you might 'a' been aboard of a steamer goin' home?" asked Anderson.

Down the River.

"'As the ole man forgiven you?" questioned Kip.

"There was no quarrel," replied the other.

Kip looked at him with disapproval. "I always reckoned you'd done something at home what made you afraid to go back. . . ."

"And why," broke in Anderson almost fiercely, "if you've got plenty of money, have you been passing off as a regular stony-broke fossicker?"

With much earnestness Bob endeavoured to justify his part.

"You see my father's rather well off, while I am an only son. And the old chap was terribly afraid that, when I had the handling of money, I should make a fool of myself; so he just gave me a thousand pounds and sent me out to the Rand, to get experience. Well, I got it; got it in bucketfuls, and made a mess of everything I tried, till I was nearly broke. Then I joined you chaps, and helped you to make a bigger mess of things. After that I did not seem to care to go home till I could put my name to some job that had not beaten me—you know the feeling?"

"Aye," said Anderson. "You've got grit."

"Somehow it did not seem to matter what it was—good, bad or indifferent, but I wanted to come out on top for once in my life. That is mostly why I fell in with Max's scheme; and you chaps, if you only took the trouble to think about it, would find that you felt the same."

The Ivory Raiders.

"Maybe," admitted Anderson, stuffing his pipe with native tobacco.

"I expect it was the boodle mostly that tempted me," observed Kip with cheerful candour.

"And, of course, when we made that ghastly mistake at Tembe's kraals we all felt more sick than ever."

"Fair putrid," agreed Kip.

"But though I don't go much on the morality of the Chutika affair, no one can deny that we pulled it off in style."

The explanation was accepted with rough cordiality and congratulation. Still Desborough was conscious that the disclosure had somehow loosened the bonds of their intimacy. The three men were no longer on the same footing.

"I hope this is not going to make any difference in the way we go on?" he remarked nervously. "I can't help having the damned money, you know."

"We won't cut you when you're ridin' in your bloomin' carriage, if that's what you're afraid of," retorted Kip.

The remark was made without asperity, but Bob was distressed at the distinction that it conveyed. The comradeship between them must be the most pleasant memory that he would take with him from Africa, and it hurt him to think of it being in any way impaired. At the risk of appearing

Down the River.

sentimental, he added, his face growing redder and redder :

"What I mean is this : I want you chaps to promise that nothing shall ever come between us. We must never get out of touch with each other. No matter what our luck may be, we must never be worse friends than we are now."

They did not look in each other's faces for fear of betraying some emotion, but the three shook hands on the bargain with a grip that removed any misunderstanding.

The river flowed tranquilly past them. Through the trees, the warm rays of the sun fell obliquely, casting tremulous shadows far out upon the water. Up-stream a long reach reflected the turquoise of the sky. They sat smoking on the bank, idly pitching twigs and pebbles into the water.

"Talking of luck," remarked Desborough, "I reckon I owe you an apology, Kip. I said your girl's letter was no good as a mascot. I take that back now."

The little man's face became illuminated, and he felt for his pocket-book.

"I reckon the spell's worked, because I never read it since I swore I wouldn't. I can look at it now, though. Lord, 'ow I want another ! But if all goes well we ought to be married pretty soon."

They were glad to relieve their feelings by the wild cheer with which they greeted the remark, and Kip triumphantly waved the letter with the

The Ivory Raiders.

Natal postmark and the beloved handwriting thereon. Then, with much self-consciousness, he removed the envelope, remarking :

"We'll do the thing in style, mates. A devil-dodger in a white surplice ; Kate in a white dress ; me in a shiny 'at an' a black coat : with the organ a-playin' 'Voice that breathed o'er Eden.' And," he added, as though forgetful of the main feature of a ceremonious occasion, "we'll all 'ave a fair old drunk the night before." Then he proceeded to give them, for the last time, the contents of the letter. So familiar were the words to him that he got to the third line before needing to prompt his memory : then he blundered, paused, and looked at the paper. It seemed as if the glance had galvanised him. All the blood ebbed from his face, and he dropped the letter as though it had been a scorpion.

Shocked at the sudden change, the others leant over and snatched the disconcerting epistle. In their turn they also dropped it, and sat as though petrified. It was the agreement that had been signed at Orobo.

Speech left them. Icy chills passed down their backs. Simultaneously the same picture presented itself to each of their minds : the assembly of sullen, wondering Arabs and staring Masungus forming a large semi-circle ; they saw themselves the arrogant dictators, forcing their terms upon the

Down the River.

two rabid, desperate men who would have annihilated them had they but known of the presence of that document, which, inadvertently, had even been exposed to them ! It took a strong mental effort to free themselves of the idea that they were still in the presence of this danger, but gradually their features relaxed, and they broke out into a volcanic eruption of laughter—laughter that hurt until it made them struggle for their self-possession; laughter which kept them rolling on their backs, pressing their aching sides.

Kip was the culprit. They recalled the dimly-lit tent, the glimmering candle, and the two papers lying together on the same box. Katie's letter had been peacefully reposing within hail of the consul at Chindi, while Kip had treasured the incriminating contract within his sweetheart's envelope. Laughter seemed indecent, but as soon as one had partially recovered the mirth of the others set him off again.

Twilight surprised them as they were excitedly discussing the development, warning them that they must make their plans for the night. If they proceeded down the river, they were sure to come to a village where canoes might be procured, and the total consumption of their provisions made such a course seem prudent. But they were already weary with the march that they had made, and inclined to risk a camp on the spot. As they were

The Ivory Raiders.

debating, a fish-eagle, poised on the stump of a tree, watching for its supper, gave a raucous cry, spread its wings, and flew across the river. Some cranes on a sand-spit above them rose in a flock and abandoned their feeding-ground.

At first the wanderers could detect no cause for the disturbance—then Anderson pointed eagerly to some smoke trailing above the bushes beyond the bend, a little procession of dusky clouds lit by glowing sparks. They stared intently. The smoke approached the bend, and suddenly a river steamer shot into view, her large stern paddle tossing the water behind into a race of foam. She was a fine craft, built for the navigation of shallow water. Her paint-work was amazingly white, and her brasses glistened at a dozen points. On either side was moored a lighter, covered down by black tarpaulin. The skipper stood at the wheel, a gaunt, lanky figure in a soiled white uniform; a black pipe depended from his middle teeth. Talking to him was a tall man, whose costume seemed as immaculate as the other's was slovenly. He was the only passenger on the boat.

She swung round the bend, coming close in shore to get the deeper water, then she fussily steamed out to the middle of the stream. The wanderers regarded her with admiration—everything looked so fresh and new, so different from anything they had seen for months. For the moment they merely

Down the River.

admired—without any thought that this apparition might affect their movements—as street-boys regard the equipage of a great lady. They had been so long in adverse fortune, compelled to travel third-class through life, that at the moment it did not occur to them that this luxurious craft with its solitary passenger was otherwise than a spectacle to be envied and quickly forgotten.

“Gad!” said Anderson, “they are in a hurry. Don’t often see them stoke up like that coming down stream. They’ll be down at the coast in less than three days. Must be some big bug on board. I wonder who he is?”

But Kip’s eyes were keener. “Why, damme,” he shouted, “it’s Mr. Almighty Smart!”

“Can’t be!” retorted Anderson. “He’s hardly had time to get here.”

“It is the ubiquitous Commissioner right enough,” declared Desborough. “But that’s not going to prevent me from going on board. Boat ahoy!”

“Hadn’t we better walk?” suggested Kip nervously. “I don’t like that cove.”

But Bob repeated the hail. “Steamer ahoy! We’re coming aboard.”

In some surprise the skipper gave orders to slow down, and directed his boat inshore.

“Put her in here, mate,” shouted Anderson. “There’s plenty of water.”

The Ivory Raiders.

The captain scrutinised his intending passengers, not without resentment. He had been impressing on his companion the responsibilities of his post, and disliked the dictatorial terms in which he had been addressed. Moreover he mistrusted, from former experience, men who came aboard in this manner. So holding off from the bank, he began to palaver.

"Where do you want to go to? Say, this company doesn't take penny fares."

Anderson ignored the remark, though his eyes lit angrily.

"Bring her in here, mate. We'll go farther than you can take us."

"Got any money?" queried the skipper.

"Sacks full," retorted Kip, who could never keep out of a wrangle. "Come on—we're in a hurry."

The boat came sulkily ashore. Within a few feet of the bank the native bo'sun flung a rope, and a plank was run out. In less than a minute the little party was aboard, including Jim, Juão, and the carriers. These men had decided to remain at a settlement lower down the river until the resentment of Max and Raphael had somewhat consumed itself.

The captain liked his new passengers less on closer inspection than from a distance. Beyond their rifles and a pocketful of cartridges, their only

Down the River.

luggage was a meagre bundle, wrapped with trade calico, containing their united wardrobe.

"Where's your baggage?" he asked sharply.

"Well, captain," responded Kip, impudently, "it's 'ard to tell. Generally speakin', I should say, it's scattered throughout Africa. The most noble Prince Makombi borrowed our fifty guinea dressing-bags. I think 'e cottoned to the silver-top scent bottles because they 'ad my crest on 'em. We've swopped our pyjamas for grub. And the fact is"—he flourished the bundle in the skipper's face—"we're reduced to travellin' with our tooth-brushes an' curling-irons!"

"Then you pay your fares before we start," snapped the captain.

The decision was discomposing, for they had recklessly distributed the ready cash that they had extorted from Max and Raphael among the carriers and Masungus. But, acting on an inspiration, Kip produced his famous pocket-book and showed the drafts that they had obtained. It was an anxious moment. Would the skipper advance on them? Suddenly they heard a dry chuckle from behind them. The Commissioner had quietly approached the group and was calmly glancing at the papers over their shoulders.

"All right, captain," he said. "I'll answer for these chaps." And reluctantly the man went back to the wheel and gave orders to cast off from the banks.

The Ivory Raiders.

Smart regarded the trio with humorous deliberation.

"Gad," he exclaimed, "you fellows have gone through Max Klein and his partner to a pretty tune! I suppose it would not be discreet to ask particulars?"

"You've made a swift journey, sir," said Kip blandly, ignoring the question.

The Commissioner laughed.

"Well," he continued, "it is not my concern and I won't press you, but I think I can make a pretty good guess. However," turning to Bob, "I mean to have the story one day from you, Desborough. Shall we say, when you are in Parliament? Anyway, I don't suppose Mr. Max will want to organise any more raids into my territory."

Aided by a powerful current the boat was making rapid progress, and the banks with their walls of tangled vegetation receded swiftly into the gathering darkness. Already the steamer's lights were making the adjoining waters phosphorescent. In the deck-saloon a boy was laying a tablecloth for dinner, and though the wanderers had recently dined they cast hungry glances at his movements.

The Commissioner handed round his cigarette-case. Obviously he meant to be friendly, and had decided not to refer to the episode of the raid. But Kip was less tactful. His demeanour was that

Down the River.

of the model boy at a Sunday School, addressing the superintendent.

"I 'ope, sir, you got on all right with Tembe after we left, an' 'ad no more trouble with them Arabs?"

"Not a scrap," replied Smart, laughing. "The Arabs did us a good turn, really. Cameron and I bargained with Tembe for two days, and he was as avaricious as a Greek. Then we changed tactics, and told him we had said our last word; called our men together, and started back within the half-hour. That gave Tembe a terrible shock. He was frightened at being left unprotected, so came down in his demands with a big jump, sent messengers after us, and next morning we started back in real earnest with Tembe himself, who came along for his pay, and six hundred of his men carrying the tusks. Most of it is in those lighters now." He pointed to the side of the vessel. "Some of it was old, and some of it was damaged by the fire. But it is a very useful lot all the same."

"I'm glad you got on so well, sir," said Kip penitently.

"You chaps are going home, I suppose, to spend your—your makings?"

Desborough nodded. "Yes, we're all going to have a spell at home."

"Boom—boom!" bellowed the syren. A canoe was frantically paddled out of the course of the

The Ivory Raiders.

steamer. Boom! A village was passed. The natives were beating a tom-tom, and they replied with shrill cries that swiftly died in the distance. Headlands approached and fell behind them; torches were waved from the banks, accompanied by shouts of menace or admiration; but the craft steamed heedlessly down the river towards the sea.

CHAPTER XXII.

HOME AGAIN.

ROBERT DESBOROUGH strolled leisurely into his father's offices in Broad Street, nodded to one or two of the clerks, and went into the financier's private room. It was the first time for two years that a visitor had entered unannounced.

Mr. Desborough looked up from his papers.

As the two shook hands a swift scrutiny was exchanged, and the elder man gave a curt nod of satisfaction.

"The change has done you good, Bob. You've lost that accommodating look I disliked. Your expression, you know, seemed always to be inviting a man to borrow a five-pound note. You look more purposeful, into the bargain."

"You seem no older, sir," replied Bob, as they sat down.

"Well, I'm glad you're home. I expected you a couple of months ago. Mr. Smart called one day and said you were on your way back. He has been home some time.

"I only landed this morning; Smart came back

The Ivory Raiders.

through the canal, but I had to return to the Cape, and I thought I would run up to the gold-fields again before I left Africa."

"I thought that Commissioner was a very capable man," remarked Mr. Desborough. "He told me that he was just in time to get that ivory. None too soon, though, as I understand some Arab freebooters were after it. By the way, where did you come across him?"

"Not far from Tembe's kraals, sir."

"You weren't after the tusks, I hope?" suggested Mr. Desborough jestingly. "But I must have your adventures when we have more leisure. Let us talk business. You are home just in time. As you are aware, I presume, after our late member resigned his seat through illness I contested it successfully. Now a general election is at hand, and you had better go down and worry the constituency at once, if you want the seat. I can't be bothered with the matter any more. But I should advise you to go and call on Lord Luton this afternoon."

Bob breathed a silent prayer that he might be beaten in the contest, and decided not to hurry forward his preparations. He glanced round the room. On the table was a bowl of exquisite roses, the only object that struck an unfamiliar note on his memory.

"I hope, sir," he remarked genially, nodding

Home Again.

towards the flowers, "that you have not become the fashionable company promoter?"

"I don't think you need be afraid of that, my boy."

For the first time in his life the son noticed a trace of uneasiness in his father's manner. Mr. Desborough gazed thoughtfully at the flowers, then rose from his chair, went to the window and looked out upon the traffic. When he turned back he was his old decided self again.

"Your friend, Mrs. Mauprey, sent me these flowers," he said. "I want to talk to you about her. Have you quite got over that affair, Robert?"

"Entirely, sir."

"She is a most charming woman, and, moreover, she has great common-sense and perspicacity. But I still believe that you and she were not suited to each other."

Bob made no reply. He regarded his father with a look of amused but respectful attention.

"I know," resumed Mr. Desborough, "that you will perfectly understand me in what I am going to tell you, though the dealings of David with the Hittite may possibly come to your mind for a moment."

Bob smiled cheerfully. "I know you can have nothing to reproach yourself with, sir. And as for Uriah, I always thought that he was the one to be envied!"

The Ivory Raiders.

"I propose to ask Violet Mauprey to be my wife. But what I want to know first is whether I can venture on such a step without raising any trace of ill-feeling between us?"

Bob rose, and frankly held out his hand. "You have my sincerest wishes, and"—he paused and looked benevolently at his father—"my blessing."

"I trust," returned Mr. Desborough, "that Mrs. Mauprey's presence in the house, as my wife, will never make it feel less home-like to you."

"Quite the reverse, sir." Bob was thinking that time had brought a picturesque requital. Two years ago his attachment to this lady had made him wince under a sense of his youth and immaturity. Now Violet Mauprey was likely to become his stepmother!

There was a knock at the door, and a clerk announced a visitor of importance.

"You will dine with us to-night, Bob? I am dining at Mrs. Mauprey's house. She will be alone. Of course I shall go and see her first this afternoon."

"Not to-night, sir. To-morrow at lunch, if I may. You and she will naturally want to be alone together this evening."

Mr. Desborough was about to retort that conventional sentimentalism need not be observed in their case, but he checked himself, as his words might be open to misconception. He looked at his

Home Again.

son shrewdly. Bob faced him with an expression of cheerful solicitude, which did not convince him, however, that the remark was free from irony.

"Well," he observed, "you have no doubt many friends you want to see. My secretary will supply you with money, if you want any. Good-bye till to-morrow, and think over the matter of the election."

The returned traveller strolled down Broad Street, westwards. The tainted air of the narrow street, the restless hurry of the foot-passengers, and the unceasing clatter of passing vehicles oppressed him. He had not as yet attuned himself to face the restraints and obligations of town life. The distaste was merely a matter of a day or so he knew, but in the meantime he longed for some association with the roving, unfettered life he had been leading.

And this was the home-coming he had anticipated so keenly! His clubs made no appeal to him, as he knew that his friends would pester him with tedious questions; or worse, they would expect him to listen to recitals of their monotonous exploits. That he should get away, even for a few hours, from this irritating obsession of bustling humanity seemed imperative, so hailing a hansom he told the driver to call at a telegraph office and then to proceed to Waterloo Station.

The train issued from this exuberant waste of

The Ivory Raiders.

iron and glass along a way flanked by the backs of depressing-looking houses. Dejected cats slumbered on sooty walls enclosing patches of black earth which served indifferently as drying-ground or lumber-yard. It clattered through the suburbs where an occasional field of trodden grass was held in bondage by serried terraces surrounding it. But at last the tiresome mass of houses and villas were left behind, and he let down the window and smelt the good fresh earth. He felt as though he had escaped from a brief imprisonment. At length the train pulled up at a country station, stretched beside a wood of larch and fir.

Hardly had he flung open the door before he was clamorously beset by two men. Kip and Anderson had been eagerly awaiting him. There was no one on the platform but a ticket-collector, and this zealous official found it necessary to plant himself pugnaciously in the gateway before he could get them to attend to such a commonplace formality as the yielding up of a ticket. Arm-in-arm they marched across the village green, and Kip pointed triumphantly at an old-fashioned comfortable inn.

“‘The Turkeycock,’” he explained. “H. Adolphus Smith, proprietor.”

As if to give some actuality to the name a fine pair of turkeys strutted about before the house in their hesitating fashion. The landlady, charming

Home Again.

and hospitable, was waiting for them at the door, but before entering Kip insisted on an appreciation of his signboard.

"Used to be a Turk on it once—a brown cove with a bushy beard, white toggery, and a blood-curdlin' scimitar. But I 'ad 'im painted out an' that old rooster put on instead. He gives a more comfortin' look to the 'ouse, don't 'e?"

Bob expressed fervent admiration for a picture, painted in streaming oils, of the most corpulent turkey he had ever seen. Then he went forward to greet the hostess. In response to a wire Anderson had come over. He had rented a small farm a few miles away. A group of yokels standing by the door followed their movements with stolid interest.

"They look on Kip as a great explorer in these parts," explained Anderson. "The little liar fills them up with a new yarn every night."

"Right up to their bloomin' necks," assented Kip. "But it ain't me to-day that they're lookin' at—it's Bob. I've told 'em the wild man from Timbuctoo was coming to gnaw a mutton-bone with me, and if they listened long enough they'd 'ear 'im snarl." Then, turning to the little company, he called out:

"Come in, boys, there's a quart o' beer apiece in honour of 'is Majesty's arrival."

In a few minutes Katie was attending to the comforts of her visitors in the cosy private room,

The Ivory Raiders.

whilst a subdued but contented buzz of conversation issued from the bar parlour. As Bob was about to propose the health of mine host and his lady, the former, with a knowing smile, went and quietly opened the door.

"Listen," he said; "they're always tryin' to find out how we made our money."

The voices could now be heard clearly. Desborough's visit seemed to have stimulated the curiosity of the "Turkeycock's" patrons, for conjectures were being hazarded freely. One man advocated that the adventurers were traffickers in ivory. Another, of a sinister mind, and with a fine ignorance of the world's progress, advanced his belief that they had been slave-raiders; whilst conventional African industries, such as ostrich-farming, diamond-mining, fruit-farming, had each their supporters. The occupants of the sitting-room listened unblushing until a high, quavering voice was raised, and all the others dropped into a respectful silence. Kip whispered that the oldest inhabitant had taken the floor. In tones mellowed by beer he for ever set the speculation at rest.

"Well, friends, 'tain't diamonds, 'tain't gold, and 'tain't ivory neither, for so be I axed the boss straight out this mornin'. An' 'e told me plain. 'E says, 'Granny'—'e allus calls me Granny, rot 'im—'Granny,' 'e says, 'I tell you true, only I don't want it 'anded about, but me an' my mates ran a

Home Again.

steam laundry in Jo'annysburg.' An' that's 'ow they made their money."

Kip closed the door and subsided into silent convulsions.

"I think," said Desborough, looking towards their hostess, "that there's only one toast appropriate to this occasion: 'The Luck' and its charming author. Your husband recovered it passing through Chindi. I am sure it is still in that famous pocket-book of his!"

"You bet, my son," corroborated the innkeeper. And they drank the toast enthusiastically.

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